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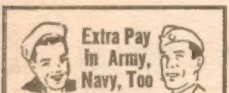


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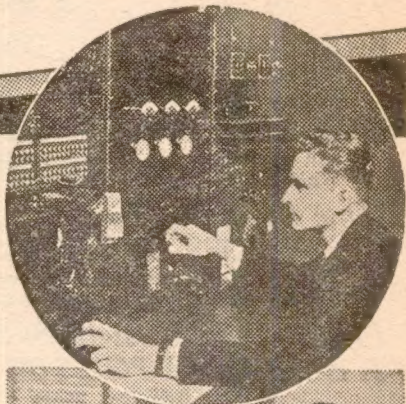
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Vol. 12, No. 1

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OF THE
ARMED FORCES



ROUND-UP

HALF-PINT'S done it! The sawed-off, fire-spitting, red-headed, stove-up old cowboy likely is mad because they didn't make him a general, but at least—and at last—he talked some recruiting sergeant into signing him on. And, according to Half-pint, we can't lose now.

Things have been mighty quiet around the *Big-Book* office since the ornery little ex-cowpuncher pulled stakes. He'd been raising hob around here so long we'd got sorta used to it, and we miss him. Of course he never was much use, as any of you folks who've been reading the Round-Up in months past can testify, but he had his points. He had no business in a magazine office. First, last, and all the time, he's a fighting man—not an editing man.

Account of his age and condition, he had a hard time getting into the army. The turning point came after he'd turned in his shooting irons for scrap. Those old Frontier Model Colts had gone through a lot with him, in New Mexico and in New York, and we would have thought he'd never part with them. We remember the time he pulled them on a Marine major who told him he was too old to fight in this war. And of course we remember the dozen or more times he's blown up around the office, yanked out those old hawglegs and threatened our lives and limbs.

When he came in at noontime one day, dehorned like that, stripped of his fighting gear, we smiled. "So-ho!" we said to ourselves, between our teeth. "Now, my wild-eyed *orejana*, we're on even terms. We'll see who's boss around here."

Aloud, we roared, "Half-pint! Come here, you no-good, knock-kneed numbskull!"

He was looking important and busy, running through a batch of papers on his desk. He looked up and we could see he was a changed man, and the change somehow went deeper than just the denuding of his hardware. "Oh, hello, boss," he said,

breezily as a mountain zephyr. "Yeah, boss, I'll be right with yuh, soon's I git this-here story unscrambled." And he turned back to his so-called work.

We got up and walked around him, peering close to make sure he wasn't packing a hideout firearm in pocket or shoulder holster. He was plumb harmless, no doubt about it.

We leaned over and yelled, "There ain't no 'and', 'but' or 'soon as' around here! When I call folks, I expect them to pay a little attention. Who in the name of time do you think is boss around here?"

"Why, gosh a'mighty, boss, you are," he said, mild as skimmed milk. He shoved the papers aside and got up, smiling apologetically. "Here, boss, have one of those-here tasty factory-made quirlies. Here, lemme light it fer yuh."

"Well!" we said, and took the cigarette. "Hmmm," we said. And then, calling to mind the fact that a boss can't go soft just because somebody acts polite to him, we said, "What the hell time do you think this office opens in the morning? So long as you're still getting paid, what's the idea of setting around in the booze-halls all morning and not favoring us with your presence until twelve noon?"

"We're at war," announced Half-pint, and his eyes were not looking so mild now. "I read a piece in the papers sayin' as how—"

"Didn't know you could read," we butted in, which was more truth than sarcasm.

He took a deep breath and opened and shut his hands a couple times. "Like I was tellin' yuh," he said very softly, "I read a

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

piece sayin' that some old saddlemates of mine in New Mexico have pitched in an' done their part. They done turned in forty miles of railroad track for the war. From now on they'll have to drive their steers to market, like in the old days. They done their part, so I says to myself, 'Why can't I?' An' that's just what I done this mawn-in'. I put my ol' smokepoles in the govm'ent scrap heap."

"That's fine—just fine." We felt a little proddy, thinking what a difference all this was going to make in our relationship. "But why the hell didn't you telephone and let us know you'd be late? And how the hell come it took all morning to scrap a couple junky old sixguns?"

"Junky!" he snorted, and his eyes were spitting fire. "Junky! Listen, yuh fat-headed stuffed shirt— Oh shucks, boss! Why d'yuh go gettin' my back up just when I got ever'thing fixed in my mind? I ain't goin' to fight with yuh—not till after we win this war anyhow. We'll shake an' make up."

"Okay," we told him, "but yuh still haven't said why yuh didn't telephone."

He pulled his hand back. "I ain't goin' to argy with yuh. But I will tell yuh somethin', since yuh think yuh know it all. If it hadn't uh been fer me stoppin' an' chin-nin' awhile with a young soldier feller from Texas that I happened to run into, *Big-Book Western* mighta missed out on what may be the best danged rip-snortin' cow-country novel of the year."

"Oh, yeah? What're you talkin' about, Half-pint?"

"Coburn. Walt Coburn." He teetered back on his heels, looking wise.

It didn't make sense. Everybody who reads Western stories knows Walt Coburn. He's a top-hand writer in any man's language, and the yarns he has spun in the last umpteen years have probably done more toward bringing the Old West to new life than the work of any other cowboy

author. But what he's got to do with *Big-Book* is more than we can see. We've been trying to get him to write for us for many a moon, and he always says he'd like to but he's all sewed up with some other magazine.

"Yeah, and what about Coburn?" we inquired politely.

"Just this." The carrot-topped runt stuck his thumbs in the armpits of his vest and puffed his chest out. "Yuh're gonna have a story by Walt Coburn in the next issue of *Big-Book Western*—thanks to me. Me an' this soldier feller got to talkin' about stories, an' he wants to know did I ever read any of the slap-bang yarns by Coburn.

"'Coburn?' I said. 'Can't say as I ever read anythin' by any Coburn. But there used to be a Walt Coburn in the Border Patrol I used to run into every now an' again, an' sittin' around the campfire of nights he used to keep us bug-eyed tellin' about this an' that. Mostly, it was about wild, hell-raisin' buckaroos he had ridden with along the Border an' up in Montana, where he was born and bred. He was one all-right hombre, this Coburn I knew, an' he sure could spin a windy,' I said, 'but I never heard he could write.'

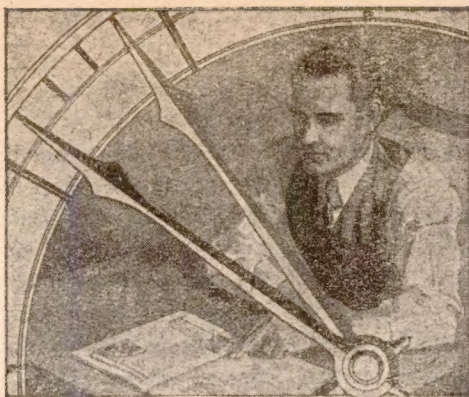
"'Well, I'm tellin' yuh,' this soldier feller said—he's a nice young hombre with sergeants' stripes on his sleeve. 'Must be the same Walt Coburn, from what yuh say. Yuh ought to read some of his stuff some day. It'd take yuh back, mister, I'm tellin' yuh. Back to the good ol' days.'

"So after awhile I come on over here, an' what do I find?"

There's work to be done, and a good part of the day is gone already, so I reminded him, "You find a lot of manuscripts piled up on your desk. How's about settlin' down to work and reading a few."

"Just what I'm tellin' yuh, yuh dumb ox," he informed us. "A lot of manuscripts, an' if it hadn't been fer me stoppin' an'

(Concluded on page 10)



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(Continued from page 8)

jawin' with that sergeant feller, more'n likely yuh would have rejected the best one in the lot. Look!"

He pulled his left hand out from behind him and waved a sheaf of papers under my nose. "A book-length novel by Walt Coburn!"

"Holy cow!" we said. "Gimme that! Where'd you find it? We've been trying to get Coburn to write for *Big-Book Western* for years!" And we make a grab for the manuscript.

"Oh, no yuh don't. Yuh can read it after I'm done finished with it."

The boss has to keep the ordinary hands in place, someone had told us once, or there'll be downright anarchy—in an office just like on a cow spread. So we stated with dignity, "Either you give me that-there Coburn novel or, once and for all, you're fired."

He haw-hawed right in our face, jerked the manuscript behind him again and thumped us on the chest with his free right fist.

"That's a good 'un, too, boss," he howled. "I nearly fergot to tell yuh the rest about that sergeant feller an' me. Me an' him, we went up to an office he knew about an' I signed on the dotted line. They told me to come back tomorrow, when I'd cleaned up my business affairs. That's what I'm doin' now, boss—cleanin' up my business affairs. Which means readin' this novel by my ol' pardner Coburn. Oh, no, boss, yuh can't fire me—I'm in the Army now."

So it is that we have lost one salty ex-cowboy from the *Big-Book* corral and taken on another. And meaning no disrespect to Half-pint, who's a good fighting man even if he ain't so helpful around a mag-

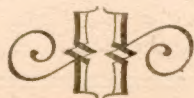
azine office, we think everyone will be happier as a result.

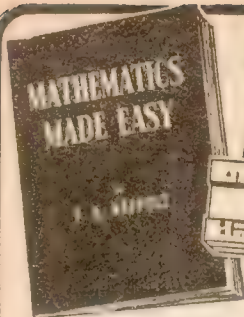
To say we're proud to welcome Walt Coburn to the string is putting it mildly. We wish we could quote the little carrot-top's outburst when he had finished reading that novel. But he has a way of going into profanity when he bubbles over with enthusiasm, and his words wouldn't look so nice on paper.

He put it a little milder in a letter that came in today from his training camp. "You got a big responsibility," the letter said, and we could see that he got one of his tent-mates to write it for him, as the spelling was pretty good. "Of course no one expects much of *Big-Book* now that you ain't got me there to help you. But the fellows down here read it a lot and you can't let them down. When I told them you've got Walt Coburn and Harry Olmsted writing for you now, they seemed to think that meant *Big-Book* would keep up the good work. I didn't tell them but I'm telling you, you dumb cluck: If you can't hang onto Coburn and Olmsted now that you've got them, here's one Socorro County cowboy that'll be up there, Army or no Army, to pin your ears back. Just to show you that there's no hard feelings about that black eye I had to give you that day you tried to read that Coburn novel before me, I'm going to write old Walt Coburn a letter today. I reckon if I call to his mind a couple of those yarns he told me one night around a New Mexico campfire it might give him ideas for another *Big-Book* novel or two."

All of which goes to show that Half-pint may prove to be a lot more use to us in the Army than he ever was around the office.

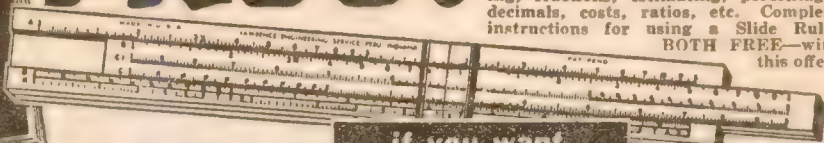
THE EDITOR.





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SHANGHAIED TRAIL DRIVER

A book-length novel of the road to Dodge

By STONE CODY



Knockout drops slipped into a drink paid for the slave-driving trail-boss's youngest hand on the long, hard road to Dodge. And Beale Fletcher knew he would never collect any greater reward—unless, in starvation and stampede and blasting, death-dealing sixguns, he could die and be born again a full-grown man!



He brought the whiskey bottle smashing down on Humpy's head.

Chapter I

WAY STATION TO HELL

BEALE FLETCHER stepped out of the ramshackle livery barn where he had put up his horse and pulled in a long breath to steady his jumping pulses. The excitement had taken hold of

him the moment the huddled frame shacks of the settlement had come into view. For this was Whiskey Ford on the Brazos—last stop before the herds jumped off on the long trail north. And this would be Beale Fletcher's first trip up the trail.

Even from here he could see the ford, where the river curved at the end of the street and the dust of the trail, churned by hundreds of thousands of hoofs, led north across the flat, dry land—due north to Dodge and Abilene. He said the names over under his breath and the magic of them put an involuntary shiver down his backbone. To the north, between the last red glow of the setting sun and the first starlit blue of the east, the Llanos Estacados showed dark and all at once mysterious—with a menace in it yet more alluring to Beale Fletcher's eyes than any woman could be.

Up the street, sixguns blasted across his thoughts in a sudden wild chorus and hoofs hammered. Half a dozen punchers were charging down on Luke Larned's saloon yelping like scalded coyotes.

Beale grinned and turned up the street, remembering that Whiskey Ford was not just a place to start up the trail, it was also hell's hottest corner before the big towns at trail's end. This was where tough trail hands, who had worked long weeks at the grueling job of gathering cattle and trailing them across a good part of Texas, took a night off and cut loose their wolves before they jumped off to the long dry months ahead.

Well, he was part of it. Unconsciously, he swaggered a little as he walked—a lean, medium-sized kid, with taut, compact, rounded muscles that spelled power and promised lightning reflexes.

He pulled up at the barbershop, where he offered himself the luxury of a hot bath and a shave and haircut in anticipation of the months to come. By the time he had waited his turn and gotten through it was late. He hesitated a moment between the

thought of the saloon or a steak and half a dozen fried eggs. The excitement of the saloon won. He'd have just one drink and then eat. That, he figured, was what a regular trail hand would surely do.

As he walked up the street, he kept a sharp eye out for Lazy Y horses, not that he expected to find any. The herd wasn't due for at least two days. But there was an off-chance that some one of the outfit—maybe even Mr. Peterson himself—had ridden on ahead.

He was a little ashamed of being here this long before the herd, but once it had been arranged that he was to sign on he couldn't seem to rest until he had hit out for the meeting place.

He was walking along, thinking this and still looking across the street to where a dozen mounts stomped or stood hip-shot, at a hitchrack, when the arm swept him off the sidewalk.

"Look where you're goin'!" a voice belted, as he went down into the dust of the street.

Beale had a fast vision of a giant of a man scowling at him, and then he coiled like a rattler and came up striking. The blow was too fast for the big man, or for almost any man, to dodge. It carried all the force of Beale's tough, powerful body behind it. It landed squarely on the point of the jaw and the impact of it was like the sound of a whip cracking.

The big man jarred back on his heels and laughed. Then something hit Beale on the cheekbone and he went down, with the street whirling and snapping like a pin-wheel about him.

For a second he lay there, trying to force himself to get up. He knew that he had been hit harder than he had ever been hit before and he knew that he had to get up, but for one long moment he couldn't stir.

It was during that moment that he heard the voice. "Humpy, damn you—why don't you pick on somebody your size?"

Following that, there was the whack of knuckles against flesh like the sound of a meat cleaver smacking into bone.

Beale struggled up into a sitting position, thinking vaguely that this was all wrong. He wasn't any kid to have somebody else take up his battles for him.

At first all he could see was a blur of moving bodies and flying fists, with the heavy shock and thud of blows going home. Then he began to make out the combatants. The newcomer in the battle was a man well under six feet who looked small beside the big man who had knocked Beale down, but it was evident that the smaller man was getting the best of it.

He was big-boned, with heavy shoulders and a barrel chest. His fighting was precise and cold, yet it had a kind of delighted gusto in it.

Beale shook his head and hollered, "Hey!" mechanically, to voice his protest at this unsought help, but even as he did so a clear perception struck him and sent his voice trailing off. For there was somehow an astonishing likeness between these men who were so different. They were both, it seemed to Beale, having more fun than a pair of liquored cowhands at a bar-becue.

The big man who had been called Humpy took a solid blow that smeared his nose over his face, and he howled with a kind of angry joy. He swung a haymaker that missed the other man's head, and then connected with a driving left that landed a little high but set the barrel-chested man back on his heels.

The shorter man snorted in a kind of grim congratulation and then ducked under a whistling right as he planted a punch like a mule-kick in Humpy's stomach.

Somebody yelled, "Go it, J. H. Tell him what the buzzsaw told." And somebody else helped Beale to his feet, saying, "Watch this one, sonny. They'll still be tellin' it when the good days come."

Beale struggled against restraining

hands. "Damn it! Don't no man kill my snakes for me."

But the shorter man had Humpy backed up against a hitchrack now, with a hand holding his shirt front, bending him back, and a right fist like a pile-driver beating against the big man's jaw. It looked to Beale as if every blow ought to have sent the big one into oblivion but none of them did.

"It ain't your jaw that's iron—" *whop* "—Humpy, it's the—" *whop* "—back of your—" *wham* "—neck that does—" *whop* "—it. You—"

The hitchrack gave away against the plunging horses. Two cow ponies reared, snorting, and stampeded, dragging their reins down the street.

Humpy lifted himself from the dust, dazed. "Reckon I'm licked," he muttered, and staggered off, weaving like a drunk. His face looked like fresh, bleeding beef.



THE shorter man straightened himself, brushing his sleeves mechanically, and Beale noticed that he had kept his black coat on during the fight and that, except for a mark high on his forehead and one on his cheek, he looked unruffled, as cool and good humored as the town queen at a sewing bee.

He came over toward Beale, smiling, but before he could speak Beale burst out furiously: "You don't have to butt in on any of my private fights, mister. If you think I'm obleeged to you, you got another think comin'. I—"

The man who had been called J. H. lifted a calming hand. "Put down them neck feathers, younker," he said amiably. "There's no call to take offense. I been meanin' to dehorn that counterfeit bull for some time. You just happened to be the first good excuse I had. Come along an' have a drink. I knew you was a fighter the minute I saw you get up an' slam him.

Only mistake you made was to put too much faith in that Sunday punch of your'n. It would purt' near fell a steer, at that. But this Humpy has got a roll of muscle around his neck that's durn near shock-proof. That's how he come by his name. Come on. Don't hold hard feelin's. It's time to drink up. An', hombre, I don't mind admittin' that I need one."

Beale gave in. He felt somehow ashamed of his outburst, yet still angry. He still felt humiliated, yet flattered, too, in some obscure way.

The other man apparently sensed his capitulation, for he released his arm, with a curious look of satisfaction in his eyes, and offered his hand. "Name's J. H. Wardell," he said.

Beale gave his own name, and shook the hand awkwardly.

He saw that the man was older than he had at first thought. The fight had left sharp lines of fatigue, almost of exhaustion, about the rock-hewn face. Beale realized that Wardell must be more than fifty. It made him feel almost forgiving, yet there was a sting to it, too, because an older man had beaten a man he, Beale, had not been able to lick.

Wardell reached out suddenly into the crowd and caught hold of a pale-faced boy, with something of the motion of a man grabbing a fish that is about to flop back into the river.

Beale found himself being introduced heartily to Walt Riggs, and then, with his thoughts still confused, he was seated at a table in the saloon, with a bottle of whiskey in front of the three of them.

He felt a little deflated, because he had learned that J. H. Wardell was the trail boss and owner of a herd of cattle bound for Dodge City. Everybody in the place seemed to know him and defer to him. If there had been a little coldness in the greetings here and there, that was only natural. Every man had his enemies, and the envious were legion. Anyway, it was

plain that Beale had been taken up by somebody who carried some weight.

Wardell cupped a glass in a big-boned hand and poured whiskey, shoving the glass toward Beale.

"Drink hearty, son," he said genially. "This ain't the best redeye in the world, but it's the best Luke's got. It'll make a trail hand of you after the first three drinks!" His voice put a perceptible emphasis on the last sentence and his eyes danced with sudden amusement.

Beale said stiffly, "I figure I'll make a trail hand, all right."

"I got no doubts of that," Wardell said. The slight smile under his drooping gray mustache was remote and meaningless and irritating, as he cupped Walt Riggs' drink in a big hand and poured the whiskey in.

At another table, a voice lifted a little above the tumult of music and loud talk and smoky echoes that made up the atmosphere of Luke's place. "The damn old shanghai-ing coyote!" the voice said. "He cain't git nobody to work for him because his grub's no good an' he'll cheat a man out of his eye teeth ruther'n pay him a plugged dollar. Only way he can git a hand is to kidnap him, the ornery—"

The voice broke off abruptly. A lean, oldish man with a body like a blacksnake whip had leaned over the table toward the one who was sounding off and looked at him with a cold and hostile eye.

The other man shut up quickly. But his eyes were venomous. Beale saw that he was one of two who looked like brothers and who had the faces and the tooth formation of wolverines.

The man with the blacksnake body turned contemptuously away. The man who had spoken out of turn glared after him venomously and appeared about to drag his gun, but then settled back in his chair.

J. H. Wardell appeared not to have noticed this incident. "Drink up, son," he said genially to Walt Riggs.

Beale wondered vaguely who the man at the other table had been talking about. Then the saloon doors slapped back and Humpy stepped in. The cuts on his face had stopped bleeding but the swelling was worse than ever.

Wardell laughed, his eyes alert. "Humpy Morgan," he murmured. Then his mouth twitched curiously.

Humpy's eyes, searching the room, fell on Wardell and he beamed suddenly. His gait, still a little weaving, led him straight to the table where Wardell sat facing Beale and Riggs.

"I been licked, J. H.," he bellowed. "But I ain't never been licked that clean an' sudden. No hard feelin's. You're the best man an' that's a fact. They don't come any better than you!"

He put his arm around Wardell's shoulders, cupped his chin in his left hand and, with the knife in his right hand, cut his throat from ear to ear.

Chapter II

BOSS OF THE SHANGHAI DRIVE

BEALE saw the knife flash out, saw it go toward Wardell's throat. Instinctively his hand moved, grabbing the first thing it caught, the whiskey bottle. He swung it in one smooth, continuous arc, and brought it smashing down on Humpy's head. The big man staggered and slumped to the floor.

From the bar the man with the black-snake body leaped forward, his sixgun bared, pointed at the falling Humpy.

Wardell had jumped to his feet. He croaked, "No, Bullwhip! No!" in a strangled voice, and then stood there, holding his gaping throat in one hand.

To Beale it seemed a miracle that he was able to talk. With that slashed throat, he should be dead!

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see

**The man who's conservation-wise
Says Thin Gillette's the blade he buys!
It's thrifty, longer-lasting, keen—
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1. WASH FACE thoroughly with hot water and soap to soften beard and eliminate accumulated grit that dulls shaving edges



2. APPLY LATHER or Brushless Shaving Cream while face is wet. If lather is used, dip your brush in water frequently



3. TWO EDGES double blade life. Marks indicated above identify edges, enabling you to give both equal use and get extra shaves



4. CLEAN BLADE in razor by loosening handle, then rinsing in hot water and shaking. Wiping the blade is likely to damage the edges

that others thought so, too. One of the wolverine-faced men was on his feet, with his hand stabbing for his gun. Then the other touched him sharply on the arm and he sat down again.

Wardell kept his feet, though his face had gone deadly pale. "We—take him—with us," he said to Bullwhip. "He owes us—some work." His grin was ghastly.

A man from the bar crowd plunged for the door, saying, "I'll get the sawbones."

Another, with his face the color of dirty linen and a manner of exaggerated politeness, picked up Wardell's chair and said through frozen lips, "Set right down, Mr. Wardell. I shore hope you're not hurt. I was standin' right there at the bar. I was just standin' there an—" He turned away and hurried out through the saloon door, and Beale could hear him being sick.

He felt a little sick himself. He pulled the still-dusty bandanna from his neck and offered it to J. H. Wardell, who took it and wrapped it tightly around his neck.

"Gawdamighty!" Beale thought. "Why don't he die an' get it over with?"

Then the doctor came.

Beale sat by, dazed, while Wardell querulously directed the sawbones as to how to sew up his neck. The scene had the mad quality of a nightmare, with the oldster cursing the medico for his ineptness and promising that if he sewed his neck too tight or too loose he'd come back and use him for coyote bait.

The doctor finished his work with his face sweating and his hands shaking. Beale glanced across at Walt Riggs, who looked as though he were about to faint. He realized then that the youngster hadn't once moved from his seat. It was as though he had been frozen there. And now he seemed about to cry.

"Quit it!" Beale snarled, glaring at him. "Where do you think you are?"

Riggs looked at him, abashed. After a moment, he straightened up and said with dignity, "Who are you talking to?"

The medico was saying nervously, "Mr. Wardell; you owe your life to clumsiness. I can't understand why a man who cut as deep as that on the right side couldn't pull straight through and cut the aesophagus and the jugular. . . ."

Wardell grunted. "Wan't clumsiness," he croaked. "Young feller hit him with bottle. Faster younker—" He glared suddenly at Beale, looked embarrassed and then rasped at the doctor, "Don't stand there gabblin', damn it. What do I owe you?"

A moment later they were going out the door, J. H. Wardell walking, chalk-faced and looking a hundred years old, under his own steam.

"I—I feel funny," Walt Riggs said unsteadily, at Beale's side.

"Then don't," Beale snapped. He felt damn funny himself, but he wasn't letting anybody know it.

"You must go to the hotel and go to bed, Mr. Wardell," the doctor said, gathering some firmness in his tone. "For at least a week."

Wardell snorted. "I got a herd to move up the trail."

"If you don't follow my advice," the doctor snapped, "you'll never get them there."

"Where'd your advice ever get you, sawbones?" Wardell rasped drily, and climbed into the saddle of his horse.

"Damn undertaker's helper!" Wardell muttered. "Ruther have a sewin' woman."

Beale said, "I'll go down to the street an' get my horse an' ride out with you."

Bullwhip came out of the saloon with the man who had gone for the doctor. They were carrying the unconscious form of Humpy Morgan, who seemed to Beale to have been unconscious longer than was usual from one lick with a whiskey bottle.

He watched them swing Humpy belly-down over a horse. Then, without warning, Riggs staggered uncertainly toward his mount, swayed, fell against Wardell and went down. In the same instant, two

shots slammed out, blasting the small sounds of the street into violent echoes.

Beale saw the shots bloom against the darkness from the alley next to the saloon. They stunned him and put a greater whirling in his head. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Bullwhip whirl as though he had been hit, and Wardell's stetson jump jerkily off his head, but what seemed to him most remarkable was the extreme beauty of the muzzle blasts flowering against the night, orange and red like the cannas that bloomed in his mother's garden.

His mind was so busy with these perceptions that raced through it that he was surprised and shocked by the slap of his Colt against his palm and the orange flowering blast of its muzzle against the dark.

One of the dim figures in the alley coughed suddenly, with a queer moist sound, pawed his chest rapidly, like a beetle, and collapsed.

The whirling in Beale's mind took on a faster tempo. He thought: *I've killed a man*. The thought went around and around in his head, arcing toward the center, until it was a small round whirligig, in the very middle, and something soft hit his face and he didn't know any more. . . .



BEALE opened his eyes and shut them quickly, because when they were open the hammering threatened to take his head off.

After a little, by degrees, he got them open again. He was outdoors and the sky was gray with dawn. He forced himself to sit up, and groaned.

An agonized voice at his side said, "Shut up. Can't a man suffer without ye hollerin' at him."

He looked and saw a drawn, pugnacious Irish face he had never seen before.

"The hell with you," he said automatically. "I do my sufferin' loud or easy, like it pleasures me."

The Irishman merely groaned and stared feebly in front of him.

Beale looked around and saw that Riggs was stretched out, pallid and breathing hard, on his other side.

Twenty yards away, a chuck wagon loomed in the growing half-light of dawn. The sharp, fresh, dusty smell of mesquite was in his nostrils. Slowly, vaguely, his memory began to function.

"Hey!" he said suddenly. "Where the hell am I?"

"I thought ye'd ask that," the Irishman moaned. "Sure and I did. Well, me boy, ye've been knocked out with knockout drops an' shanghaied by Shanghai Wardell, curse his soul, an' ye're twinty mile from nowhere—at the least. It's only Wardell among the divils of hell that can drive cattle twenty mile in half a night.

"Ye'll be ridin' with the worst fed crew that iver punched a dogie north on the Chisholm Trail and ye'll find yerself doin' the work o' tin men, an' ye'll think ye've niver slept before in yer life. An' come the ind, himself will chate yer out o' the first an' last damn dollar ye thought ye'd earned with him.

"An' so now ye know, and will ye be shuttin' yer holler an' lettin' a poor man make his p'ace wit' the devil who took him for a fault he niver knew about an' put a plague on him he niver desarved?"

Beale had a vague impulse to grin, but it was smothered in the misery that enveloped him and the anger that was slowly beginning to grow under it like a fire smoldering deep under damp dead leaves. He sat for a long moment thinking. The full force of what the Irishman had said began to filter through to him, as though the fire had gained heat enough to burn the damp away and was pushing upward.

"Look," he said grimly. "This Wardell helped me out in a fight an' I helped him out later on. You got to be lyin'. There ain't no skunks like that. An' you can take that any way you want to."

The Irishman came out of his abstraction long enough to glance at him pityingly. "Me bye," he said, "ye'll get no foight out o' Mike Whitlaw this marnin'. See fer verself if I'm tellin' the truth or no."

Beale got himself painfully to his feet.

A raucous voice bellowed, "Roll out, ye waddies. Rise an' shine!"

Through the morning dusk, Beale recognized the lean, snake-rounded form of Bullwhip Barham. To his left he saw the red glow of the cook fire, with the cook stumping around it, and the odor of cooking bacon and coffee came to him sickeningly.

But what interested him more than that was a stocky, big-shouldered figure spraddle-legged in the background, with a bandage around his throat that showed white in the half light.

Beale stalked up to him grimly. "What is this?" he demanded.

Shanghai Wardell grinned at him ingratiatingly. "Glad to have you with us, younker," he croaked. "Allus did like a fightin' man."

"Don't give me any of that," Beale snarled. "I damn well told you last night, when you asked me, that I wouldn't work for you. I'm signed up with Lazy Y an' that's who I aim to ride for."

"Son," Shanghai Wardell said unctuously, "I done wrong, an' admit it right off. But the fact is that I needed a good hand an' a fightin' man. Why, by gravy, that's one thing I never could resist."

"You-can save your blarney for the Irishman," Beale snapped, narrow-eyed. "It don't go down with me. I'm takin' a horse an' I'm making tracks back to Whiskey Ford. If you think that ain't so, then you've bought some trouble. I'm not ridin' with any damned old shanghai-in', double-crossin' son that don't even know how to die decent when he's got his throat cut. You—"

Shanghai Wardell raised a sudden hand. "You can talk like that to a man that's

keepin' his head on his shoulders by the hand of God alone, but if I was in shape, you'd sing another tune, you damn young rooster. Because I can smooth down them feathers of your'n any time you're ready to try!"

Beale cocked his right fist. "By God, I wish you was in shape," he raged. "You think you're somebody, because you pole-axed that steer that caught me off guard, but I'll dehorn you plenty, the minute that gullet of your'n gets healed up."

"That'll be in four or five days," Wardell snapped. "If you can hold out that long, I'll give you a beatin' that'll put sense into you permanent."

Beale's face screwed up in a grimace of anger and contempt. "You think you'll get away with that?" he snarled. "Get me to stay on for four or five days, so I'll be workin' for you. It don't go. I can wait, all right. I'll get you at Dodge City, an' get you plenty, an' that'll do me."

Wardell smiled a little. "Big talk," he croaked. "But I notice you ain't got guts enough to take on a job that you've probably heard was short-handed an' maybe in for trouble."

"Guts?" Beale shouted, infuriated. "I saved your damn life twice. An' the way you pay me off is to shanghai me out of my own job, that I signed on for. Why, damn you, I got a good mind to finish the job I made Humpy bungle on you."

Shanghai Wardell quieted down a little. "You saved my life, all right—by killin' Buck Youngblood. But what did you want me to do, leave you there to face a killin' charge, or to be dry-gulched by Hank Youngblood? Hell, it's a good bet I saved your life by takin' you away."

Beale glared at him, beginning to be bewildered, but not dumb enough to take all that at its face value.

Wardell looked at him shrewdly. "I ain't lyin' to you. It's true I needed a hand an' that I wanted you. If I hadn't I wouldn't have cared what kind of trouble you got

into. But facts are facts, just the same. Never mind my reason. I stood by you an' dragged you out when you could have been held for a killin' or been killed. You owe me somethin' for that."

Beale stood altogether still for a long moment, then he drew a deep breath. "What I owe you," he said softly, "is the damndest lickin' a man ever got. You think you're a wise old curly wolf, but I'm goin' to teach you some things you never even dreamed about before I'm finished with you." He stopped abruptly and then said, narrow-eyed, "I don't reckon you'd loan me a horse if I asked for one, would you?"

Shanghai looked a little taken aback. "Fact is," he said, "there's not one to spare. But the road back ain't but about twenty mile. Mebbe you can walk that."

"I reckon I won't," Beale told him slowly and grimly. "I just wanted to get it on the record. I reckon I'm goin' to let you win this one—God help you. You started it, an' now we'll see who finishes it."

Shanghai Wardell stared bleakly into the hard hostility of Beale's eyes. An expression of satisfaction crossed his pallid, rock-hewn features. "Son," he said complacently, "you've called the turn. We'll see who finishes it."

Beale felt the anger begin to run out of him, leaving only the headache and the sickness. He had a vague idea that, somehow, he had been licked after all. But for the moment, he didn't care.

As he turned away he saw that the crew was behind him, had overheard all that had been said. Most of them were looking away, in an elaborate pretense of not listening. Only the cook, Stovey Jacks, and the Irishman, Mike Whitlaw, were staring openly.

As Beale turned away, the cook said softly, unbelievably, "Well, I will be damned."

Mike Whitlaw set his jaw and went up to Shanghai Wardell and began to curse him. He cursed him softly and evenly and with a blistering eloquence. Shanghai listened and then grinned a little and hit Mike Whitlaw suddenly exactly on the point of the jaw. It was a blow with all Shanghai Wardell's weight behind it.

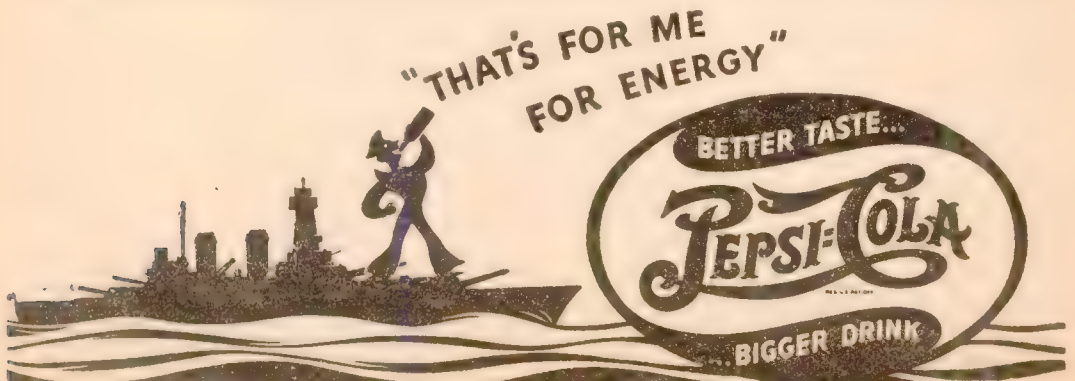
Mike Whitlaw's knees sagged and his face hit the dust with a soft *plop*. The bandage on Wardell's neck turned suddenly crimson. He touched a hand to it, almost absently.

Then he snapped at the cook, "Well, Stovey, what are you yawpin' at. Deal out that grub."

Chapter II

NO CARRION FOR THE BUZZARDS

BEALE thought that he would never forget that day. His head ached as though it would split in half. The hammer blows of the sun on his shoulders



were heavier, it seemed to him, than he had ever felt. And the dust crowded his nostrils and collected in the back of his throat until he was swallowing liquid mud.

He had been put to riding drag. The injustice of that tore at his sick innards and kept a hot anger welling up into his burning, hammering brain. Before the day was over, he had decided that he would kill Shanghai Wardell when they got to Dodge. First he would beat him with his fists, and then, when he had had a fair chance to recover, he'd rid the earth of him for good. A damn, treacherous skunk like Wardell didn't deserve to live. The hound wouldn't even get along in hell.

If Beale hadn't been so mad, he would have quit. Instead, he choked on his anger and stuck with it. The slower animals that fell back to form the drag always had to be worried and harried and prodded along, to get them to keep up, so that riding drag, aside from the dust, was always mean work. Today it seemed to Beale that the lagging steers were heavy pieces of rock that he had to lift endlessly forward with hands of lead.

What burned him up particularly was not that that pale-faced kid Walt Riggs was riding flank with Mike Whitlaw, it was that Humpy Morgan was riding point with Shanghai Wardell! Riding point!

Of course, Shanghai might have Humpy up there so he could keep an eye on him, but even if that were so it meant that Wardell thought he, Beale, was more of a sucker than any of the others.

On the left of the herd, Bullwhip Barham was riding flank alone. Six men to herd six thousand head! Hell, it couldn't be done!

But it *was* being done. He wondered suddenly who was herding the remuda and who was driving the bed wagon. The answer to the last was first in coming. Stovey Jacks was driving both the bed wagon and the chuck wagon. The tongue of the first was anchored to the back of the chuck

wagon, with Stovey driving a six-horse team to pull them both.

Beale realized suddenly that Bill Magruder was the only one left to drive the remuda. Then who the hell would be night-hawk?

And did Wardell expect a man to ride night guard for two and a half or three hours *every* night after a long day's work? A man couldn't do with five hours sleep a night for months on end.

He laughed. The whole setup was impossible. It couldn't be done. Shanghai Wardell was off his nut. Him and his herd would crack up and go to hell long before the drive was well begun.

His croak of derision turned to a chuckle of sardonic enjoyment. When the drive did go to hell in a hand basket, he, Beale Fletcher, would turn back and join up with the outfit he had signed with before. But he wouldn't be leaving Wardell's herd before he had handed its owner what was coming to him. On that thought, his chuckles died away and his jaw set grimly.

They milled the herd for grub at noon, when Beale was beginning to think he couldn't endure to ride another step. But the sight of Shanghai Wardell heartened him. Wardell didn't look like a ghost, he looked like Death itself. His skin had drawn in cadaverously under his cheekbones and his eyes were sunken so deeply they seemed like gaps in a whitened skull. His skin was the color of a mildewed sheet.

Beale said nothing. He forced grub into himself because he wanted to be able to stand the long hot grind of the afternoon. He thought, with bitter, uneasy satisfaction that nightfall would probably find the death's head, Wardell, really dead, as he should have been when Humpy cut his throat. But mixed with the satisfaction was a resentment because he, Beale, would not be the one to finish off this outlaw sheepdog of the long trail.

But at night Shanghai Wardell was still on his feet. He seemed to have shrunk

still further, but the husk of his voice was strong and grim as he dealt out orders for the night. Beale was told to take second guard—with Humpy Morgan.

He stared at Shanghai with outraged unbelief when he heard that. So Wardell was yellow! He was trying to get Beale killed off before he could call for his showdown with the boss.

Beale said nothing, only looked at Shanghai and laughed.

After a supper of sourdough biscuits, salt pork and unsweetened coffee, he went to his soogans and fell asleep. He slept as though he had been knocked on the head. But a sixgun was in his right hand. He told himself groggily that he wouldn't put murder past this outfit, and he determined that the slightest sound or movement would bring him awake.

A few minutes later—not more than thirty seconds, it seemed—a hand shook his shoulder roughly.

Beale stirred. "Leave me be," he muttered. "I'm gonna sleep—gotta sleep long time."

The hand shook him more roughly, and somebody was saying something in a low, urgent tone. It sounded threatening to Beale. He came up through the drugged mists of sleep. His right hand caught at the butt of his gun, which had fallen from his grip. He sat up wide-eyed, shoving at the man who was shaking him.

"I'll shoot," he clipped out at Bill Magruder, who stared at him wonderingly by the light of a half moon.

It was ten-thirty, and his turn on guard.



HE CAME wide awake and grabbed a cup of coffee from the pot still simmering on the coals of the fire and gulped it and got his night horse and met Humpy Morgan.

He eyed Humpy coldly. "You an' me are doin' this watch together. I figger we'll

finish it together. Try to slope on me an' I'll put enough lead into your backbone to sink you clean through hell."

Humpy appeared dimly startled, but he said nothing at the time. Later he rode up to Beale and murmured, "What's the matter with you? You sold out to Shanghai Wardell after all he done to you?"

Beale snorted. "If I didn't need you," he said coldly, "I'd take you apart for sayin' that. This herd is licked because it ain't got a decent crew to pour it along the trail, but while it lasts an' while I'm with it I'm figurin' on you to help out. Try to coyote on me an' I'll kill you deader'n week-old skunk meat."

Humpy stared at him and after a moment his grin appeared almost wistful in the moonlight. "Damn if you ain't the dumbest kid I ever did meet up with," he said gently.

Beale could feel his cheeks flush up. "You—you—" he burst out furiously, then checked himself. "I got a settlement to make with Shanghai Wardell," he said grimly, "but that ain't your business. What is your business in this: I'm goin' to beat the livin' daylights out of you, Humpy. I don't like any part of you—your looks or your yeller heart or your back-stabbin', throat-cuttin' ways. I'm goin' to make a medico's case out of you, soon as I don't need you any more. I hope you come aroun' with your sneakin' knife, so's I can blow the yeller guts out of you. But all that'll keep. Right now, you ride herd—an' I'll be watchin' you doin' it."

Humpy looked at him and laughed softly. "I ain't never fought by moonlight at the side of a herd," he said. "Mebbe you'd like to start in right now. An' whoever knocks whoever out, kin stampede the herd over him, an' nobody won't know nothin' about that."

The proposal stunned Beale. He could feel a chill start up his spine from the base and run up through his brain. He understood, suddenly, that Humpy meant that literally, that if, in the vague light of this

moon, he ran into one of the giant's hay-makers he would have the herd stampeded over him—that after a few hundred steel-sharp hoofs had hammered at him he would be nothing but a mess on the ground which even the buzzards would not pick.

He knew he was outmatched and beyond any hope except the miraculous, unbelievable chance that he could somehow get the better of Humpty Morgan.

The moonlight seemed cold, more chilling than the blast of a Norther. He had talked out of temper and arrogance. He had high-headed himself into something he knew now he couldn't handle. And there was nothing he could do now but fight—and die horribly.

He could see Humpty's wicked grin vaguely shadowed in the moonlight as the big man waited, and he knew there was no mercy there for him.

There was only one way out. He could rely on his gun, and his gun was fast. Chances were that he could beat Humpty to the draw. He could whip it up now, without warning, and give Humpty his orders. He could force the man to ride out his trick at night guard. Later, he'd fight him. . . .

But then he knew, with a sense of deathly sickness, that that wasn't possible. Humpty had called the turn, and he had to see it through.

For a long second, the silence endured, while he regarded that thought with a baffled and profound wonder. This was one of those things a man couldn't shirk.

Humpty outweighed him by a hundred pounds, had a longer reach, overwhelming power. Beale knew he didn't stand a chance, yet he also knew, just as clearly, that he couldn't back out of this thing.

Humpty laughed. The laugh had the quality of confident, triumphant mockery. "You thought you was a little bigger'n what you are, didn't you? Well, now you're up against the real thing, you can forget all that. Go climb on your pony an' thank

yore God I'm lettin' you live. An' don't git high-headed an' tryin' to interfere with anythin' I aim to do." His tone changed, suddenly good-humored. "You ain't a bad kid," he said. "Jest full of sap an' swole-up notions. You an' me'll git along all right in the end."

Beale drew a long, shaky breath and then got down from his saddle. "You hump-backed, flap-eared, skunk-smelling bag of windy guts," he grated. "Come down off that leather an' I'll drive more cattle over you than Hell'll ever see on market day!"

Humpty stared at him, as though altogether unbelieving. Then he grunted, hunching his big shoulders. "This here's a pleasure I didn't really look for," he said. "I didn't know you was that dumb, but I allus did take fun in stompin' a fool."



HUMPTY swung down and squared away, chuckling a little, coldly. The sound of that laugh put ice into Beale's belly.

He shuffled a step or two, fainted with left and right, and then whipped in, shooting his left like a thrown stone. It landed solidly on Humpty's eye and a fraction of a second later his right slammed home to the giant's midriff.

Humpty grunted and then laughed. Beale had whipped aside, avoiding the big man's punishing left. Now he shuffled swiftly in and out, both hands feinting, looking for an opening. Humpty jabbed with his big left fist, forcing Beale to jump to the left, and then uncorked his right in an overhand of surprising speed. Beale flung himself still farther left, the blow grazing his cheek like the breath of a tornado.

Recovering, dancing off, he knew that he had escaped death by a hair's breadth. That blow would have knocked him out of his senses, and Humpty would have sent the cattle over him.

The knowledge chilled him, sent him backing warily. Behind him, the steers were on their feet, snorting uneasily. The fact that they weren't running already meant only that they had been driven so hard for a night and a day that they were half dead from exhaustion.

He whipped his left toward the big man's face, running in and slamming a lightning blow to the liver and then snapping his left in a hook that landed just under the ear. After that, he was dancing away.

Humpy grunted hoarsely and charged, his big fists flailing. Beale ducked, sidestepped and punished him again. Humpy's left slammed in from the side, looming like a suddenly seen rock out of the path of the moon.

Beale ducked, but not in time. The huge knuckles grazed his cheekbone, knocking him sideways, dizzily fighting to catch his balance.

Relentlessly, Humpy hurtled at him. Beale caught his footing, flung himself aside.

His gasping breath ripped in and out of his lungs because of the sudden desperate fear in him. He lashed his left at the figure that drove at him, saw a big foot drive out in a bone-smashing kick, straight for his shin. He moved just fast enough to avoid being caught square in the arch of the driving boot between heel and toe, but the heel ripped the side of his leg. It was a blow at once numbing and agonizing. The heel of Humpy's boot tore the flesh off the outer side of Beale's leg. He felt the oozing blood.

He crippled back, gasping and cursing. Humpy drove in for the kill. Beale's left stabbed him a crashing blow in the left eye. His right slammed like a desperate bolt of lightning for the jaw. Humpy staggered, grunted, laughed and came on.

The pound of racing hoofs slammed into Beale's consciousness. Somebody pulled a bronc to a rearing halt, yelling, "Quit it, damn you!"

The cattle snorted and slowly began to mill.

The figure slid from the saddle. "You, Humpy, damn you, quit it!" a voice snarled.

Humpy paid no attention; he drove toward Beale, the killer in him sensing his opportunity and unwilling to be turned aside.

The figure looming in the darkness was Bullwhip Barham. His muscular, hard-hitting figure whipped in between Beale and Humpy. His right boot licked out, driving toward Humpy's belly. Humpy grunted in agony, doubled up.

Bullwhip Barham waited until Humpy began to straighten up.

"Damn you!" Humpy gasped. "I'll kill—you for—that."

Bullwhip's hand flicked to his sixgun. The barrel flashed briefly in the moonlight and descended with a sickening *thwack* across Humpy Morgan's face.

Humpy gave a sharp cry and staggered back, both big paws going to his face.

Bullwhip Barham spoke briefly, coldly. "You're watched, Humpy. You ain't goin' to get away with anything at all on this trip. I'm willin' to save you to work because it looks like you was needed, but I'm achin' to kill you for what you did to the boss back in Whiskey Ford. Try me just onct more, an' I'll drop you like a pole-axed steer. Now start ridin', slow an' easy, an' sing easy an' soothin' to them cows. If we ever have a run when you're ridin' herd, God help you, because you'll be dead meat as soon as I can throw a gun on you."

Beale watched Humpy crawl painfully into the saddle and then he himself mounted. He had a sudden irrational feeling that he hadn't needed Bullwhip's help. It wasn't the same mad kind of feeling he had had when Shanghai had butted in back there in Whiskey Ford. He was, he found, kind of glad that Bullwhip had horned in. But he still had an unreason-

able, cocky feeling that he hadn't needed it, that, somehow, he would have won. Why then, was he glad that Bullwhip had come up?

It was then that he had a sudden, sobering, frightening look into his own soul. It was because he knew, if he had won, he would have stampeded the herd over Humpy's prone body as sure as God made little apples.

The thought made him suddenly sick as he listened to Humpy's hoarse, tuneless chant: "*Oh, bury me not on the lo-one prai-irie . . .*"

Chapter IV

CATTLE TRAIL TO HELL

THE days drifted by, one like another. There was the blast of the sun that seemed to strike with hammer force the moment it got over the horizon; there was the choking dust, the monotonous, cheap, inadequate grub, the endless hours and the lack of sleep. The need for sleep was the thing that began to haunt Beale. To be able to sleep enough—not long, comforting, healing hours, but just enough for once. That was his conception of heaven—a heaven as far out of his reach as the most remote star.

His only comfort was that this pace would kill Humpy, whose face looked like a scarred hunk of meat awkwardly carved by a kid with a dull knife. It would kill Shanghai Wardell even faster. For no man with his throat so brutally cut could survive it.

Shanghai Wardell's drawn gray face drew into a caricature. His great solid shoulders thinned down into humped shadows, and death sat in his skin, grinning evilly. Beale kept expecting bitterly that the maggots would crawl there momentarily. But nothing happened, except that Shanghai suddenly began to improve. And with

each passing day—it seemed almost with each passing hour—the lusty life flowed back into him, filling out his cheeks, lifting his shoulders, blazing in his eyes.

Humpy got well, too, and seemed to swell with evil life. The bruises went down and the scars on his face healed, so that only his flatly smashed nose and the scar left above his eyebrow by Bullwhip's gun-barrel remained as evidence of that wild night by the side of the herd.

But Humpy seemed strangely subdued. Once, when he fell into a temper because there was no blackstrap to sweeten the coffee, he hollered at Stovey Jacks. Stovey said nothing for a long moment. He was holding a pot hook into the deep heart of the fire coals, and after a time he brought it out with the tip of it glowing white hot.

"Mebbe you don't like my cookin'," he said quietly to Humpy. "You low-down, un-fathered son of somethin' that crawled out from under a rock!" And he ran at Humpy with the white-blazing iron.

Humpy gave a wild yell and took out for the big woods. Stovey, panting and limping, followed him as far as he could and then came back to the fire, sticking the iron into it again.

"If I wasn't so stove up," he panted grimly, with his gnarled, whiskey-bloated face twisted into a deadly serious grimace, "I'd have caught him. If anybody else has got any complaint to make about the grub, he can tell it now. I'm listening."

Nobody had. And nobody even grinned.

Beale began to worry. This drive wasn't going according to schedule. The men who should have given out or died were getting stronger every minute, while he, who should have been top dog by all decent standards of justice, was so tired that one morning when he was routed out of his soogans he walked around them automatically, leaning inward, for three turns before he could get hold of himself enough to stand erect and stagger to the creek to splash water on his face.

Sleep was what he wanted. By every law of mankind, no man could work so hard and do with so little sleep. Seven of them to night-hawk the remuda—that meant one night a week without any sleep at all. And for the other six nights, it was five hours each. Nobody could last that out. Least of all, the kid Walt Riggs.

It was Walt Riggs who bore heaviest these days on Beale's mind. Because Walt was dying under his eyes.

Whenever he began to feel a shadow of respect or liking for Shanghai Wardell, the thought of Walt came into his mind and wiped everything out under a blanket of solid hatred and contempt.

ters just weren't up to the job of fighting.

The kid turned red, then scarlet and fevered under the sun, then black-brown, and then he began to fade visibly, like a waning shadow on pale brick.

Grudgingly, Beale had to admit that Shanghai Wardell, who wasn't a man but a devil, did somewhat more than his part on this drive. If the others worked like two men, then Shanghai worked like three. But what of it? That was only his hell's meanness working him to death for the sake of a dirty dollar.

It was crooked and it was dirty and it merited a solid licking for him to have shanghaied Beale Fletcher, but to take a

Walt Coburn, the top-hand cowboy writer, heads our fiction lineup for the next issue! No Western reader can afford to miss his thrilling book-length novel of Southwest Border renegades caught up in the mad, hair-trigger swirl of rebellion in the Mexican hills. Be sure to get a copy of April Big-Book Western and read "The Z Lightning Strikes!" On sale Feb. 19.

Young Riggs had been raised on a cow spread, but he had spent the last three years working in a bank. Some call of adventure had led him up the trail. He had been signed up with one of the Ralph W. Buford outfits—forty men to handle a herd hardly bigger than Wardell's. With grub that was a legend of luxury up the trail. A kid would have a chance with an outfit like that. But Walt Riggs was hardly fit for a drag that was breaking down even Beale's iron-tough sinews.

The kid wouldn't say anything. Beale had liked him that first night in the saloon. He began even to respect him now, because the kid was so done in that half the time he didn't know what he was doing, yet he wouldn't open that tight, emaciated mouth of his to utter a word of complaint.

He was holding on, like a rabbit that had suddenly developed a bulldog muscle in his jaw but whose fore and hind quar-

green, soft, gutty kid like Walt Riggs and kill him for the sake of his damn money was murder of an especially loathsome kind. Beale made up his mind that at trail's end he would kill Shanghai Wardell very quickly and coldly for the sake of the honesty and decency of this country and of all men who rode the trail north. He would do it if he hanged for it.

And every time he laid his eyes on Walt Riggs, seeing the life flicker down in him to a scarcely perceptible flame, like a dying match in hot sunlight, he silently renewed his vow.

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AS FOR Shanghai Wardell, he blandly and callously ignored the slow death he was dealing out to the kid. He paid him no attention and gave him no favors nor kind words. From time to time he laid the rasp of his tongue onto the kid

when Walt did something wrong, but otherwise you'd have thought he was not even aware of the kid's existence.

He laid the rough of his tongue on Beale, too, for that matter, every time Beale did anything that a quick-tempered boss could call wrong. Several times Beale was on the point of calling Wardell on that, either for fists or for gunplay, but somehow he never did. There was just some shadow of justice in Wardell's bawlings-out that kept him from open murder. In fact, they had the opposite effect. He found himself straining through his daze of exhaustion to be a little better than he actually was. He told himself he wanted a clean slate when he finally laid this old renegade steer by the heels and led him up to the slaughter pen.

And the days went on. They had missed Doan's Crossing on the Red. That, Beale decided, was some more of Shanghai's meanness. They had been hit by hail that had stones as big as a man's fist; that storm had sent the cattle, not stampeding, but milling into a hundred small, stubborn herds spread out in all directions. Beale wouldn't have believed that was possible, but it happened and it took half a day to untangle them and get them lined out on the trail again.

They had run into a late norther that had set men and beasts shivering for two days and nights. That had been followed by the worst heat Beale had ever known, a blaring, windless hammer-stroke of sun that roared to a crescendo at noon and jumped like a fever-patient's pulse until long after sundown.

They had crossed the flooding Canadian in a thunderstorm, against even Bullwhip Barham's advice, with battle blasts from heaven rolling above cattle and horses half mad with excitement, and the ball lightning dancing from steer horn to steer horn above the water.

And there was no sleep. Beale felt like crying over that. No matter how a man

tried he couldn't get enough sleep. He could drive all day and ride herd in the night. He could work fourteen to sixteen grueling hours in all kinds of weather. But he couldn't do it without sleep. His dream of Paradise got to be a place where he could sleep and sleep until the end of time—after, of course, he had killed Shanghai Wardell and Humpy Morgan.

Somehow the two got confused in his mind. One had put him in hell and the other had showed him that deep inside he was a killer, and he couldn't forgive either one. If such a thing was possible, he hated them both equally.

Meanwhile, Walt Riggs continued to die before his eyes.

There came the day—it was two mornings after they had crossed the Canadian—when Walt Riggs could not get up. He lay like a log and muttered feverishly as they tried to shake him awake. Finally he woke up crying, "I can't! Damn it, I can't! Leave me alone!"

Shanghai stepped up and sloshed a pail of water in the kid's face. Afterward, he jerked him to his feet and snapped, "Git to work. You're whinin' like a sp'iled baby."

Walt Riggs stared at him out of dazed eyes and then suddenly went hysterical. "Damn you!" he yelled, high-voiced. "Let me alone. You're a devil. To hell with you! I can't—" He suddenly began to sob.

Shanghai slapped him across the cheek, so hard that his head rocked. "Git to work, I said," he roared.

It was then that Beale hit Shanghai. The blow went high, but it had all of Beale's stocky, muscular, coordinated fury behind it. It landed like the high pop of a snapping branch on Shanghai's eye and sent him staggering back, dazed.

The world fell on Beale then. It blazed up in a fury of pyrotechnics and went out into deep black. . . . He must have been unconscious only a second, because he came awake to the sound of Shanghai's . . .

bawling, savage voice slapping profanity at Bullwhip Barham for having interfered, for having hit Beale behind with a sixgun.

The livid scar on Shanghai's neck was dripping blood from one of the points where it had been sewed.

Beale got groggily to his feet. "I didn't hit you soon enough or low enough," he grated, "or else I'd have torn the damn head off you—like I will one day."

Shanghai Wardell did a curious thing then. He slipped his gun out of the holster and pointed it at Beale. "Git to your work," he ordered, cold-eyed. "You'll meb-be git your chanct, but it won't be until this drive is over. An' the next time you give me trouble, you won't even git a chanct. I'll shoot the damn cocky backbone out of you. Try an' remember that."

"All right," Beale said shakily. "But just bear in mind that I'm goin' to kill you as soon as we get this beef to market."

Walt Riggs snarled in a sudden, quavering rage, "If I don't kill you first, you rawhidin' ol' groundhog!"

He started toward Wardell as though to put his threat into immediate execution. Shanghai stared at him without giving ground, and then a sudden expression of almost beatific satisfaction came over his face. "Son," he said in a kindly voice, "you'll git your chanct, too. Only, we got a herd to drive to market first. Remember that!"

Walt Riggs stopped, and Beale saw that his expression was more one of bafflement than of being bluffed. He turned away, toward the remuda, to rope out his horse. Silently, Beale did likewise.

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THEY were getting deep into the Indian Territory now. This was the danger stretch, with both redskins and renegades on the prowl. Beale could feel the tension run through the crew, especially among the older hands who had

been up the trail before. Raw as tempers already were, from long hours and bad grub and lack of sleep, they got even shorter.

Beale sat cross-legged by the fire one night after the others had crawled off toward their blankets. Bullwhip Barham sat beside him.

Barham was the only one of the crew whose face was not deep-lined and gaunted. So far as Beale could see, the trip had made no impression on him so far.

"What's it all about?" Beale demanded curtly. "Looks like everybody was screwed up in a knot. Hell, this is a bad stretch, but other outfits have got through. Why shake against the fence like a tumbleweed in a wind?"

Bullwhip looked at him. "Shanghai ain't friends with an enemy of your'n," he said cryptically.

"I didnt' ask for the forked tongue," Beale growled irritably. "Say what you mean."

Bullwhip eyed him coldly. "The Youngbloods work around here, 'cordin' to the talk," he rasped, "with a bunch of renegades an' halfbreeds. They're wuss'n full-blood 'Paches. Ain't either brother ever loved Shanghai. Fact is, both owes him somethin'. You killin' or near killin' Buck Youngblood didn't help none. Them fellers don't forgit."

Beale considered that. "Then why ain't we hurryin'?" he demanded.

Bullwhip let go a short, dry laugh, like the sudden rasp of a file over leather. "You don't know much, do you? You ain't noticed, meb-be, that when we shoved 'em hard, the feed was poor. Ner you ain't noticed that right now the feed is rich an' high. Them cows is movin' eight mile a day an' puttin' on a pound of grass fat betwixt sunup an' sundown."

"Better take some fat off 'em than have 'em run off by a bunch of outlaws. Ain't Wardell got any sense at all?"

Bullwhip looked at him pityingly. "A .

man'd think you'd learn somethin'," he allowed grimly. "You been ridin' up the trail with the best damn hell-driver that ever coaxed a dogie over the Arkansas an' you ain't looked at nothin' but the gripe in your own guts. There was plenty you could pick up, but I reckon it ain't for you. Anyways, git this into your head: J. H. Wardell will give ground to hail an' rain an' drought, he'll finagle an' he'll shortcut an' scheme an' plan for anythin' that God wants to deal, but there ain't any hand that a man born of hellion ner angel can deal to him that he wouldn't call with two lousy, sick-lookin' deuces if that was all he had!"

He stood up and looked down at Beale witheringly. "Hell!" he spat. "There was a hunderd things you could have learned, but you got too much fool pride in your craw to digest anythin'."

Beale sat for a long moment, with the weary anger crawling up his throat again. He thought exhaustedly that he didn't quite know why he bothered to get sore. Or why he bothered even to talk to anybody that was tied up with J. H. Wardell.

Sure, it was true that he had learned something. He had learned a hundred small tricks of the north-trail, but what did that add up to? The big thing he had learned was that there were ravening skunks like Shanghai Wardell in the world. All right—so there had been an outfit that had moved out half an hour after Wardell's J. H. Connected road brand, and not even their dust had been in sight after the first few days of travel. And yet Wardell's cattle were picking up weight. So what? Was he supposed to accept a thing like that in place of the ordinary human decency that ought to live under any man's brisket?

He pulled himself up morosely and crawled into his blankets. It was not until then that he realized that for the first time on this drive he was not sleepy. He was so wide awake, in fact, that he knew he would not be able to sleep at all. He rolled

over on his back, forcing himself to lie quietly, while he looked at the stars, overawed by the multiple brilliance of their warm, mysterious light. Orion rode high, with the jewels in his belt that any vaquero might envy, and the Big Dipper stood still with its pointer stars steady and true on the North Star, toward which the herd of the Milky Way eternally bent, like cattle that had followed the contour of the country off their course but were working their way back to the trail.

As he lay there, fragments of the day flashed back to him: The curious light in Walt Riggs' eyes when he turned away from his first defiance of Shanghai Wardell. Wardell's queer look when he had answered Walt Riggs softly. And Walt's hearty appetite at noon, when he had shoved the eternal salt pork and biscuits and coffee down him with real relish.

Beale thought of how he had been mysteriously promoted that day to ride flank with Humpty, dropped back from point, as his partner, and of how alert and snaky Humpty's eyes had suddenly become. He wondered idly whether there was anything at all in Bullwhip's talk about the Youngblood brothers. Of course, there might be. A well-mounted man could cover in one day what a trail herd took three to traverse. It would be easy to overtake the herd—especially for a man bent on avenging the death of a brother.

Beale watched the Big Dipper in its low and stately progress, always with its pointer stars attached to the Pole Star as to a pivot. He watched it, fascinated—until an enormous diamond-backed rattler reared its head and humped its back and began to buck, and a Mexican in a high sombrero grinned at him out of kindly wrinkles and said, "Don Bealito mio, I think you will never learn anything in that so stubborn head." Beale thought when the snake comes close I will hit it in the teeth and if it spits poison I will have it for my breakfast tomorrow, but in any case I will

ride it and let her buck! Until the North Star dimmed suddenly and guttered and went out like a snuffed candle.

CHAPTER V

TRAIL WITHOUT END

THE STAR had reappeared when Beale's shoulders began to rock, and he was riding it instead of the snake, bucking high over the other stars in the most glorious ride he had ever taken in his life, but it was lonely, bitterly lonely, and he knew he must get back quickly to the common warm things of life. Only the bucking was bad. In a moment, with that wrenching at his shoulder, he would have to grab leather.

Freezing water splashed into his face as the star plunged into a chill mountain pool. He gasped and woke up to find Mike Whitlaw bending over him. "You an' me for the herd," Mike said, watching his eyes come open. "Git up now."

Beale staggered to his feet, with all his bones and muscles groaning. He felt his way blindly toward his night horse.

On the way to the herd, Mike Whitlaw said softly, "They've been soft-driv an' fat-fed. They're spooky as scared kittens. We got to be careful they don't run on us."

Beale looked at the dying moon. In that eerie light, he thought, anything might happen. It was, he realized, nearly three hours before daybreak. Well, they wouldn't run. Miraculously, they hadn't done so yet—partly, of course, because they had been so hard driven to begin with. And they wouldn't tonight.

"Shut off your watch," Mike Whitlaw said genially. "If they hear it ticking it'll set them to stampedin'. Not," he added carefully, "that oi'd moind. For 'tis said that betoimes a cow is killed in a stampede. 'Tis the only way, surely, that we'll ever have fresh meat."

Beale grinned. "We'll sing 'em a little

song," he murmured, and lifted his voice in *Chisholm Trail*.

But Mike Whitlaw had a plan of his own. He waited until the big, razor-horned, brockle-faced lead steer was on his feet and snorting uneasily at the sight of heat lightning far on the horizon, and then he popped his hat sharply against his chaps. The herd lunged to its feet as one beast and took out southward.

Beale howled and dragged his sixgun while his pony flattened out, belly to the ground. He fired three shots to wake up the camp. He was driving hard for the lead steers, hoping to mill them, but Mike Whitlaw, far back on the flank was blasting his sixgun like a madman, as though to stampede them worse.

In the end, at dawn, they did mill the animals and began the gather and the slow ride back.

Beale hardly knew what to do. He felt as though Whitlaw had gone crazy and he knew he ought to be reported. But somehow he couldn't bring himself to do it. Instead, he rode up to Whitlaw alone.

"Mike," he said grimly, "you been shanghaied like I been. I reckon you figure that you don't owe any loyalty to Wardell, but you stayed with the herd, like I did, when you could have walked out. I'm one of them that's drivin' this outfit up the trail. What I do to Wardell afterward, or what you do, is one thing. What happens to the herd we're drivin' is another. Me, I'm a trail hand. An' I just want to give you fair warnin'—you stampede this herd again while I'm with it an' I'll shoot you plumb loose from your backbone."

Mike Whitlaw stared at him. He looked a little puzzled, but he only said mildly, "Okay, Beale."

Later that day he rode in with half a beef over his saddlehorn.

"Me byes," he said cheerfully, "here's eatin' meat. This steer got trompled some, but sure an' the best of him was lift untouched."

Shanghai regarded him sourly. "In this outfit, we don't eat stamped meat," he said curtly. "It ain't at all good for the health."

Mike stared at him, surprise and bafflement in his eyes. Then he glanced quickly suspiciously, at Beale. Beale's face was stony.

"The hell we don't eat it!" Humpy Morgan snarled. His small, pale eyes were fixed on the beef with an expression of greed that was startling in its intensity. "I'd like to see the hombre that could keep me from eatin' good clean cow carcass when I git the chanct."

Shanghai eyed him coldly. "Mebbe you're seein' him," he remarked, and some of the determination went out of Humpy's eyes.

But the fires of revolt had caught. Even Magruder showed himself determined that good meat should not be wasted at a time like this.

Shanghai looked at Beale and his eyes were suddenly mocking. "What do you say, Beale?" he asked.

"Peel your own aigs," Beale advised him irritably.

Shanghai laughed. "Well, since you all feel like you do," he said, surprisingly, "we'll eat the meat—though, in general, a puncher that eats stamped beef is spoiled, like a sheep-killin' dawg."

His eyes drilled at Mike Whitlaw, who carried the meat over to the chuck wagon with his gaze averted.

That day Shanghai quickened the pace of the herd. Instead of eight miles, the day's log was close to fifteen. It was driving, exhausting work. The older mossy-horns, which had been piling up fat and meanness during the days before, kept trying to break out because the pace was too fast to suit their taste. And the weaker, lazier critters dropped back until the drag would have looked like a second herd if the little crew hadn't been constantly on the job.

LATE in the afternoon, through the haze of dust and the savage beat of the sun, Beale saw that they were coming to an ideal bedding place. Up ahead, a cup of ground sheltered by gentle wooded ridges, was grass belly deep to a tall steer, and only one way for them to run, except up a narrow valley where a small, clear creek ran through the bed-ground. At the smell of the water, the herd almost stamped, and Shanghai, who had dropped back watchfully, turned into a riding fool, cursing men and cattle alike as he drove them until the herd was past water and grass and helling up the trail at a racing pace.

That night they bedded down in open country, with thin grass and no water. Beale glared at Shanghai resentfully. If there was any reason for this, he couldn't think of it. The damn old fool must be crazy.

Later, Shanghai said easily, "We'll kind of double up on the guards tonight. This is bad country."

Beale stared at him. Double up? Hell, they were already so doubled that . . . But he said nothing.

"There are eight of us. Stovey an' Bill Magruder will ride guard on the remuda," Shanghai went on. "The rest of us will ride regular herd guard, with Bullwhip doin' double duty. Beale an' me will run a kind of an outer guard, fixin' it like we think best."

Beale still said nothing. He had nothing to say—because he did not realize that he was expected to do guard all night long, without any sleep whatever.

Maybe he would have said nothing even if he had known that, because he had long ago given up the heavenly hope that he might get some sleep, and the difference between five hours a night and nothing would have made little impression on him. What did bother him was the idea of riding herd with Shanghai Wardell. If he had been able to pick any other companion for

a night of riding, he'd have chosen a poisonous hop-toad endowed with flea-bitten wings and a venomous disposition. One can't with comfort, ride all night with a man he has determined to kill at the first opportunity.

He sank his teeth into the first bit of juicy cow-meat he had been privileged to taste in many a long day, and as the juices ran down his throat he didn't give a damn whether he had to ride guard or not, or whether Shanghai was crazy or not, or whether the renegades were a false alarm or not. In fact, it occurred to him that maybe it would be all right if renegades did horn in on this party. He might join them and spend a glorious lifetime eating stolen beef.

Maybe he and Mike would . . .

Shanghai's voice jerked him up. "That's four cups of coffee you've had, son. Ready to ride?"

Beale looked at him. "Maybe you're old as God's cast-off chaps," he said, "but that don't give you no privilege to call me son," he said. "If what you're aimin' to do is cattle work, then say so—an' leave off the trimmin's."

Shanghai's cheeks flushed, looking purple in the firelight, and his eyes blazed. "Git up, cowpuncher, an' grab you a night horse. I'm not entertained any by that lip of your'n."

Beale got up, grinning. He knew he had scored that time.

They rode in silence. Beale saw that Shanghai was riding slow and soft in a circle that a quarter mile wider radius than that made by the regular herd guard.

After a time, Shanghai said, "Keep your walkin' pace, an' your eyes an' ears open. I'm goin' to trot on ahead until I'm about opposite you. We'll ride it that way."

Beale grunted his assent, and was unable to keep the relief out his voice. Anything was better than riding stirrup to stirrup with this old maniac.

After Shanghai was gone he got to won-

dering. Maybe Hank Youngblood was after the herd. And maybe he was after his, Beale's, life. But he shook that thought off contemptuously. To hell with Hank Youngblood!

Only that didn't quite take. Something in the darkness, the silence, the loneliness, began to get to him. In there, out of his sight and almost out of his hearing, was the herd. Somewhere beyond, Shanghai Wardell rode. But on the outside circle there was nothing. Nothing except arroyos hidden by the night—and perhaps death. Any attack would be directed at the herd for profit. But for revenge it would be directed at himself.

He realized suddenly that he was almost powerless to protect himself, with that possibility of menace from the outer circle of darkness. His nerves tightened up. His senses keyed gradually to a point of tension that was almost unbearable. The muffled sound of his horse's hoofs in the thick grass sounded loud. The creak of his saddle was a shrill agony in the night that threatened to drown out the soft noises his ears were straining for—movement on the brushy bank of an arroyo, the soft *plop* of a horse's hoofs on the far grass, the whisper of iron being pulled out of leather, the click of a cocking hammer.

And nothing happened. Nothing whatever. When dawn came and it was apparent that nothing was going to happen, he cheerfully could have shot Shanghai Wardell.



NOTHING happened except that they were allowed to sleep until midday.

It was a hot, restless sleep, as they squirmed under the blazing sun, jerky with fatigue yet sunk desperately in forgetfulness and the profound need never to wake up.

Waking was a searing agony. It was Shanghai Wardell, red-eyed but alert, who

shook them out of their sleep. The man seemed tireless and he was as implacable as a fiend from hell. Beale lay and cursed him with every blistering oath he could lay his tongue to. Shanghai let him cuss himself out. He seemed mildly amused. Then he walked on to wake the next man.

That evening at sunset they got to the North Fork of the Canadian. For an hour the cattle had been pressing forward, the scent of the water in their nostrils. At the sight of the willows and cottonwoods that marked the river, Beale breathed a sigh of relief. Water here, bed down, and then—sleep!

But it wasn't to be so. Shanghai Wardell rode back to where Beale was at flank and shouted, "We cross. Keep 'em movin'."

Beale cursed a little, but in his heart he knew it was better to drive them past water than to bed them on this side.

Only, far off to his left, down the slope of the ground, he saw another herd grazing in the slow circle that trail cattle made before they bedded down. He wondered why the others had not crossed. They must have got here at least an hour before, and probably two or three. He had seen no dust ahead all that afternoon, and even in this rolling Indian Territory land he would have seen or smelled something if they had been within five or six miles.

Up ahead, the herd stopped. The cows began to low and to mill, trying to break out of line. Beale swore and went to work. He wondered what the trouble was. After a little, Bullwhip rode down. "You're wanted up front," he said curtly and turned away. Beale could see the smoldering temper in his face.

He spurred his horse and drew alongside. "Who bit your dog?" he demanded, sourvoiced.

Bullwhip looked at him and snorted heavily. "River's in flood. You're picked to be one of the heroes because you look so dumb."

Beale said nothing, but he had made up

his mind by the time they got to the river bank. If even Bullwhip thought the stream was too dangerous to cross, he would not be sucker enough to try to lead out. This was one time when Shanghai Wardell would get his come-uppance.

Wardell sat glowering by the river bank, watching their approach. He said nothing as Beale rode up and took a look at the river. It was a lot worse than Beale had imagined. He could see high-flood marks etched across the opposite bank and this flood was not far below that. The brown waters swirled with a savage, silent anger.

Wardell looked at Beale. "Bullwhip says we can't cross it," he snapped, "an' he knows as much about this trail as me. There's a herd out west of us that's been here since before noon. An' they think they can't cross. The way all that adds up is this: Anybody who follers me across this river is plain loco. But I'm crossin' it an' leadin' this herd across. I just wanted to know what you was goin' to do—stay, or cross?"

Beale took a long, weary breath. With it put to him this way, he didn't have but one answer to make.

"It's your herd," he drawled. "Lead 'em out."

From the other flank, Walt Riggs shot him a startled, almost unbelieving glance. Beale saw that Walt's face was pale.

Shanghai's features did not change expression. He grunted, simply, and led out. His horse hit the water. The animal reared and tried to back up as the force of the current caught his forelegs. Then, under the stab of Shanghai's spurs, he plunged in. He was swimming within three paces.

The lead steers hesitated on the bank, snuffing the water, trying to drink, yet conscious that they were supposed to follow over.

Beale scraped sulphur with his thumbnail, cupped the match flame in his other hand and leaned forward toward the lead mosshorn's rear. "Heeyah!" he yelled, and

applied the flame where it would do the most good.

The lead steer bellowed, lashed out with his hoofs and plunged into the water. Snorting, the others followed.

Shanghai tried to swim his horse upstream, but the current bore him steadily down and the cows, swimming desperately, followed.

Beale put his horse into the water, on the downstream side of the steers, trying to urge them upstream. But almost at once it was apparent that there was little he could do. The swirling, savage current caught at his soaked clothing, tried, with an almost human, malevolent hand, to drag him under. Out of the saddle, hanging onto the pommel, he realized that, booted, spurred and gun-weighted as he was, he could not hope to swim if anything went wrong.

Across the river, Shanghai Wardell had found a shallow approach to the bank. He got his horse up it and yelled encouragement at the others.

Beale saw that the herd was about to drift to a point lower down. He yelled at his horse and jerked on the upstream rein.

The horse swam in toward the herd, snorting, gasping. Shanghai yelled something at him but he could not hear it above the noise of the steers, grunting as they swam with the tips of their horns knocking together.

Then Beale saw that the lead steers had followed Shanghai, were scrambling up the same shallow bank. He felt relieved and swam on in with his horse.

Dripping, he stood on the bank watching them come across.

They swam with an air of desperation, snuffing, their heads only above water and the violent force of the current shoving at them, ripping at them. Two by two, one tailing the other, until the sun went down and dusk put its long gray fingers over the land, picking out the hollows, marking the rises and ridges and dry washes until the

cottonwoods showed black against the pale green sky. It would be touch and go whether they could get them across before the black dark came.

A fish jumped upstream, snapping at some invisible fly, and beyond it Beale saw a log coming down. He yelled a warning at Humpy Morgan, who rode the upstream flank and was almost midstream.

Humpy saw the log, managed to swerve his horse, and then the big piece of wood hit the nearest steer like a projectile. The steer bawled and swung, crippled, downstream. The log caught his companion critter in the groin and sent him thrashing under.

On the lee flank, Mike Whitlaw cursed, flapping his hat desperately at the swerving cows. But there was no hope in that. The following cattle swerved also, sheep-dumb, and began to mill.

They milled in a chuffing, panic-stricken circle downstream and back toward the bank they had come from. Mike yelled and frantically tried to turn them. The whole herd was drifting downstream now, circling, with Mike in the middle of clicking, yard-long, needle-pointed horns that had only to rake him or his horse to send him to his death.

CHAPTER VI

THE TRAIL WOLVES STRIKE

BEALE could see his face go pale and was about to urge his own horse into the current again when he saw that Shanghai Wardell was already in and that he had gone upstream, his horse swimming against the current.

Beale followed suit, seeing at once that that was the only way to get down and try to break that fatal milling.

In midstream, Shanghai turned his horse and went driving down-current, his horse moving at a pace that seemed like a swallow's flight to Beale.

He swung his own horse, with his belly tightening in sudden panic. Shanghai was headed like a bullet toward that circle of milling, needle-pointed horns. He was yelling as he went, but that had no effect on the panic-stricken cattle. They were circling, bellowing, clicking horns, the whole herd drifting downstream rapidly toward where the water ran deep and swift and then began to break against the rocks.

He had a glimpse of Whitlaw's frozen features and saw his hand whip up with a sixgun in it.

"Don't shoot," Wardell yelled furiously, and then his horse hit the nearest steer.

The impact was shoulder to shoulder as the horse tried to sheer. It knocked the steer around, turning him face to face with a following beast. The steer behind tried to turn upstream.

Shanghai ripped through, with the needle of a horn slashing his ear open. In the same instant, Beale saw that Mike Whitlaw's horse had a horn through his throat and that Mike had gone under, the water stifling his yell into a sharp choking sound.

Beale's horse hit the rump of a steer, grazed another, and then, miraculously, under his furious kicking and yelling, turned upstream again. A drowning face showed near him and he grabbed at it, but the current was carrying it too fast. An instant later, Shanghai Wardell bobbed up, caught the drowning man by the shoulder and turned suddenly on his back, as though he, too, were drowned.

They disappeared and Beale saw that, curiously, the herd had returned to its original course, except for several steers which floated downstream, bellowing, toward the rocks.

He saw Shanghai and Mike racing downstream, heads together, and he struggled for an instant with the impulse to turn his horse and try to overtake them, knowing, even as he thought of it, the hopelessness of the attempt.

Then he saw Shanghai's free hand move

up and heard a voice, faint and husky: "Bank—rope."

He drove in toward the bank. His gasping horse tried to stop there, as they made it out of water, but Beale drove crueler steel into him than he had ever before used on a horse. The animal jumped nearly out of its skin and hit the river bank at a dead run.

Beale swung a loop. The lass' rope whipped out a full forty feet and Shanghai's arm stabbed it.

Beale hauled them in. Shanghai looked at him sourly. "Sometime I'll show you how to use a lariat," he grunted.

Mike Whitlaw showed sudden signs of life, his eyes flickering vaguely open. "You dang fool!" Shanghai roared at him. "Don't you know that on the down side of a herd you got to watch what's comin' from up above? You lost me half a dozen head of beef, yuh whittle-headed Irishman! You—"

Beale turned on his heel and stalked indignantly upstream, his blown horse following him, head down. But he saw, as he walked, that the last of the herd was coming over all right, except for a scrawny cow of the drag that could not quite fight the current and drifted down toward the rocks, stabbing vainly for bottom and bellowing plaintively.

He got on his horse and followed the streaming herd, seeing that, far ahead, Bullwhip was milling them, preparatory to bedding down.

Shanghai passed him at the gallop, riding his own horse, which had somehow gotten ashore.

"Keep 'em goin', yuh damn sheep-wit!" he bellowed on a rising yowl. "Line 'em out!"

And so they rode, drenched, plodding, with the dark around them now like a sodden cloak.

Beale drew one long, bitter breath and brought out cusswords he didn't even know he knew. They were going to ride all night!

He found his place and rode it, savage inside himself.



LATER, long later, when some of the bitter anger had died out of him, Shanghai appeared out of the darkness. "Ride up front to the left, Beale," he said. "About a quarter of a mile ahead of the herd. I'm takin' the right. We might have trouble." His voice was mild as milk.

The things Beale wanted to say died unaccountably in his throat. He grunted and got his horse in motion.

He rode wide—a quarter mile left, a quarter mile in front of the lead steers. And instantly fatigue struck at him—a weariness of exhaustion and utter indifference. This was just some more of it, after all. When they got to Dodge he would kill Wardell and then sleep for a million years. After that, he would stay in Texas.

He had no consciousness that he was helping set a precedent for generations of Texans, as other men had before and would after him—establishing the axiom that in Texas a million years is only a catnap and a flea less sizeable than a Percheron stallion is inadequate to disturb a tired man's slumbers.

He had no consciousness of anything except that he was tireder than he had ever been. Even the upflung ears of his night horse, to which he had changed a while back, made no impression on him. It was only when the animal stopped short, snorting suddenly, that he began to come awake.

The awakening was heightened in that very instant by a queer orange bloom among the sage and a savage snapping by his ear.

He ducked and whirled his horse, his Colt jumping automatically into his hand. To his right he heard other shots and a sudden stampede of hoofs.

Without thinking, he ignored the hammering shots from the brush at his side and

raced back toward the herd. The steers were turning, he saw, turning in a queer way—not stampeding but with a picked-up pace, like a company doing column left at the double.

Behind him he heard a hammer of hoofs and guns blasting and overhead was the snap and snarl of .45 slugs. The lead steers were racing along the flank of the herd, so close that it looked to him as if they were trying to break through or else crowd the others out of their course. But not a bellowing, oncoming steer gave an inch, apparently.

It was the damnedest stampede he had ever seen. It looked, by God, like a relay race on a double track.

A sudden storm of hoofs beat at him from the side, and there came a burst of staccato yells, punctuated by gunfire. He realized that he must have ridden blindly into the path of the main body of the renegades.

Instinct counseled him to follow the herd or get the hell out of the mess any way he could, but all at once the temper that had been riding him for days broke loose and drowned any natural caution he had. He swung his horse sharply and let go one savage yell and charged directly at the oncoming body of riders.

His sixgun bucked against the palm of his hand like a sun-fishing mustang, hammering at the gunflashes ahead of him. His horse gave a queer, hopeless grunt and went down on its nose, turning heels over head. Beale went heels over head, too, landing on a shoulder and rolling hard.

The breath was knocked out of him and the hammering hoofs of the renegades whipped past him, missing him by the miracle that is a horse's instinct in the dark.

The herd milled wildly. A section stampeding broke off. The others tried to follow but were broken up by a snarling racket of gunfire near the center.

Beale lay still with his breath held, to

see if they would come pounding in his direction. It came to him suddenly that all this talk about the remaining Youngblood brother had been more than just talk. This was his work. Nobody else's.

Two horses hammered near him. Humpy Morgan's voice snarled, "Yell like a 'Pache, you fool!"

"How does the 'Pache yell go?" Mike Whitlaw's voice said pantingly.

But Humpy was busy yelling and did not answer. The only answer Mike had was just before Humpy began to holler—a split second that merged into eternity for Mike. Beale heard the blast of the sixgun and the sick smack of a bullet hitting flesh and bone, and then Mike was out of his saddle. Humpy went on, whooping, his sixgun beginning to talk into the air.

Beale got to his feet and got Mike's horse before the bewildered animal could quite get away. He bent for an instant over Mike, fumbling at him. His hand touched his head first, sliding toward the forehead and then checking in a welter of blood. He turned the face up and saw the darkness against the white, and then he was in the saddle, sick.

The man who had shot Mike had ridden in from the left and afterward had charged down toward the herd. Beale charged down toward the herd, too.

He heard a hoarse voice which he did not recognize: "To me! To me, you damn fools! You've bungled it! You're millin' 'em like a passel of dumb-headed cow-nurses! *Come here!*"

A man raced by Beale, saying, "Come on, Ben—the Youngblood's hot. Gather round." He chuckled as he hammered off, like a man who had made a good joke.

Beale's empty sixgun had broken from his hand when he fell. He reached for the left gun he wore for show, because he couldn't shoot with his left hand. By a miracle, it had stayed in its holster. He hefted it in his right hand for a second,

then sent Mike's horse jumping belly-down for the group he could see forming in the dark ahead.

Mike was a damn fool. He had deserted to the enemy, unless Beale read the situation wrong. But Mike had been a trail pardner. He deserved better than to have the front and back of his head torn out for some foolishness like this.



A MATCH flared ahead, showing him his way. The glow of it showed many men and horses. The match flared down, without quite going out, and the group faded out of his sight slowly. But he could still see a little and he was almost in range. He let out one high-pitched yell and thumbed the sixgun.

The blast of it cut the momentary silence like a meat axe hitting splintery bone. His eyes narrowed and cold now, he shot again, driving the lead where it belonged. Flame-flowers blossomed instantly in the dark ahead and slugs sang toward him like angry hornets.

Hoofs hammered beside him and a grim voice said, "If you've got to go loco, at least lay close to your horse's neck." The voice rose to a furious shout: "*Lay to your horse's neck!*"

Beale bent over, and lead, like the Devil's benediction, touched at the part of his hair.

Shanghai Wardell's sixgun hammered at his side, beating a savage counterpoint to his own shots.

"Ride through and then turn," Shanghai said grimly.

Before them, the group appeared to be breaking up, as though in panic. A horse had gone down screaming. A man yelled in agony.

The match he had seen was being used to light a torch. They had been going to use flares to stampede the cattle. The torch blazed up suddenly.

A sixgun blared in Beale's face, the powder blast scorching his ear. Behind that blast, in the sudden flare of the torch, a face showed—Buck Youngblood's face! Beale yelled, the sound torn out of a throat tight with terror.

Buck Youngblood's ghost was haunting him, flaring death at him in the night. A tempest of utter panic flooded him. He pulled his horse up, spun him on his heels and charged back to where Buck Youngblood was wheeling to fire again at him. He whipped his sixgun toward the ghost, triggered frantically. The hammer clicked down, brassy, next to inaudible. The ghost gun blared again as he charged past, blinding him briefly.

He raised the barrel of his Colt and struck out, terror and anger giving force to the blow. He heard the ripping, splitting crack of it and knew that no man could outlive that blow. His empty Colt might as well have been a tomahawk.

Behind him he heard a hoarse, furious, agonized voice cry, "Get him! Damn you, get him! He killed Buck this time for sure!"

The howled words were like a queer refrain for the hammer notes of a sixgun blasting lead about Beale's ears. But there was another Colt hammering and then another.

He knew, as he fled, that Shanghai Wardell was lamming back through the broken group, with death in his hands. But what he had not expected to see was a slender figure on a bay horse driving in diagonally with his gun yammering. For one instant Beale saw Walt Riggs' face in the glare of the torch which its panic-stricken holder had flung desperately to the ground. It had the look of a kid who had made up his mind to dive into water he feared.

And then, out of the night, a white-hot iron made circling arcs through the dark and Stovey Jack's hoarse, exultant voice was yelling, "Wahoo!" It was the final touch for this group of scattered renegades.

One rider hollered and lit out, and the others turned almost as one man and high-tailed after him.

But in the dark Beale could hear Hank Youngblood's passionate voice cursing them, and he knew dully that his account with the Youngbloods was not yet closed. . . .

CHAPTER VII

DODGE CITY SHOWDOWN

DODGE CITY. Beale shook his head as though to clear his eyes of a mirage. It seemed impossible that after all these months they were really there. But the sight persisted. From where he sat his horse he could see the far huddle of buildings, with the station house and the cattle corrals and the dim glint of the railroad tracks pointing back, up the slight slope, to the east.

He looked at it and after a while he laughed. After all his dreams it looked like just another town, and to him it meant only one thing—sleep.

With Mike Whitlaw dead, they had been more short-handed than ever. The days and nights had been a steady nightmare.

Shanghai Wardell came back from town. "We'll drive 'em right in," he said with satisfaction.

He had made some deal with a buyer which evidently pleased him. They drove them in. And after an endless, red-eyed while, the delivery was completed, just as the sun was going down.

Beale rode up to Shanghai. "I'll take my pay now," he said.

Wardell looked at him mildly. "Don't worry. I've arranged for the cash to be ready. I generally pay off in the Crystal Bar. I'll see you there after dinner."

For just a moment it came to Beale that this old buzzard might try to slide out without paying anybody. He didn't put it past him. But then he put that thought

out of his mind. Wardell was a known cattleman, with a reputation to maintain. He would pay off all right.

Beale went and had a bath and a shave and haircut and dinner. That took all the cash he had. But he had seventy-five dollars or more coming to him, and with that he could sleep for a long time and then get drunk.

The Crystal Bar was crowded when he got there. Wardell was sitting at a table in the corner, looking tranquil. Before him stood a half empty whiskey bottle and a number of glasses.

Beale saw none of the crew except Bull-whip Barham, who was drinking at the bar with some punchers Beale had never seen, and Walt Riggs, who was in a corner looking like a short-horned kid, for all his brown, hard face.

Beale went over to Shanghai. The cattleman smiled at him widely. "Sit down, son," he said heartily. "An' drink up. We've come to the end of the road."

Beale stared at him coldly. "Never mind the drink. I just come for my pay."

Shanghai looked hurt. "Now, son," he said, "what hurt'll a little drink do? Drink up. Your pay's ready."

He poured out a whiskey glass full and shoved it at Beale. Beale saw that it was not a big glass such as had been used to drug him back at Whiskey Ford and that Shanghai had not cupped his hand around it as he had that night—no doubt to drop the powder into it before he poured the whiskey. And he was thirsty.

"I'll take it," he said grimly, "but it ain't hardly a friendly drink."

"Now, boy," Shanghai said gently. "Don't be that way. We been a long time on the trail together."

Beale drank his drink deliberately. "I'll say it's been long," he said grimly. "Now I'll have my pay."

"Why sure. But have another drink, Beale. You don't seem friendly at all."

Beale looked at him and drew in a deep

breath. "I promised to kill you. Did you forget? I don't know why I don't do it right now."

Shanghai grinned at him. "Business first," he said.

He laid out money on the table. Beale looked at it, counted it with his eyes.

"What's that?" he asked grimly.

"Why, that's your pay."

"Don't joke," Beale said gently.

"You had seventy-five dollars coming to you," Shanghai said.

"An' that's forty-nine fifty."

"Well, yes." Shanghai seemed almost apologetic. "You see, there's your private horse back there. We didn't have time to take him with us an' I told the livery feller I'd pay for him. So at twenty-five cents a day that's \$22.50. An' then, there's that beef steer you fellers agreed to eat—the one that was killed on stampede. Three dollars for your share of that. I'm not sayin' anythin' about the beef we lost in the stampedes and the water. Could be called carelessness, but I'm pocketin' that loss myself. I—"

Beale laughed. His gun slipped into his hand. "Why, you damned old high-binder—" he began, with the fury rising under his effort to control his voice.

Shanghai said suddenly in a tone that could not be ignored, "Look out, son. Behind you. Hank Youngblood."

Beale turned his head, with his gun resting quietly on his lap.



HANK YOUNGBLOOD had come in with two men that Beale didn't know. They swaggered up to the bar and demanded whiskey. In one corner of the saloon a man straightened a little—a broken-nosed man with no chin and wicked eyes. It came to Beale suddenly that that hombre was in this, was merely waiting his cue. This, in fact, was a gun-trap. A trap for him—Beale Fletcher, It

flashed across his mind that he had been merely a dumb, self-confident fool. Everybody had tried to warn him of this, but he hadn't wanted to believe it.

It had been he who had shot Buck Youngblood back there at Whiskey Ford and had spoiled the Youngbloods' attempt to cut down Shanghai Wardell. It had been he, going crazy, who had broken up the attempt to stampede the herd and so had robbed the Youngblood gang of thousands of dollars. And it had been he, finally, who had spilled Buck Youngblood's brains so that he would never ride again.

He remembered the sharp crack of his sixgun and the curious splitting sound. And afterwards he had seen what had been left of Buck Youngblood. It had been like tapping something clean and sharp along the grain and having it pop into two halves. He wouldn't have believed the thing could have happened that way.

His eyes whipped over the place, trying to peg down the details of the trap. Bullwhip Barham was at the end of the bar, his snake-like body seeming to coil within its own skin with the sudden intensity of his awareness. An hombre with a straggling mustache and leering eyes joshed him in an oddly menacing way, while behind him a big, beefy-faced jasper licked his lips, pleased, and yelled pleasantries into Bullwhip's ears.

It looked like Bullwhip was plenty taken care of.

That left Hank Youngblood and his two friends and the man in the corner. And there was no other Wardell man in the saloon, outside of young Walt Riggs and old Shanghai and himself—until Humpy Morgan walked in.

Humpy slammed through the doors with his big chest leading. He stood, arms akimbo, surveying the room, with his small eyes snapping wickedly. His glance passed the table at which Beale and Shanghai sat as though it didn't exist, and fell on Hank Youngblood.

"How're yuh, Hank?" he greeted.

Then for the first time he seemed to see Shanghai. "Why, damn if it ain't old dope-carryin', nickel-chisellin' Wardell!" he roared. "Hell, are you still alive, with that cut gullet of your'n?"

And it was plain where Humpy Morgan stood.

Beale thought bitterly that Shanghai Wardell was no more than a damn old fool. He had told Shanghai what had happened that night of the raid when Mike Whitlaw had been killed. He had known then that the thing to do was to put a hemp necktie around this howling gorilla's hump. But Shanghai had merely said that what he had heard was good for suspicion, which they already had, but not for proof.

And now Humpy Morgan was the factor that tipped the scales.

But even now Shanghai didn't move. "Feelin' your oats, Humpy?" he asked mildly.

Humpy looked somehow disconcerted.

Hank Youngblood swaggered out from the bar, grinning, looking like a wolverine licking his chops. He said, "Howdy, Shanghai. Who's this wet-nosed kid you got with you? He looks like a mangy little back-shooter to me. Has he got any guts?"

Beale had his head turned and was looking at the weasely eyes over his shoulder. His lips moved to answer, but Hank Youngblood's right hand swept out and slapped him hard on the side of the head.

The blow caught Beale half off-guard, but he went with it and it did not stun him as it was meant to do. Riding with it carried him off his chair. He saw Hank Youngblood's left hand move for the gun at his belt and in the same instant he saw Hank's eyes widen and the movement of his left hand change from an easy, confident piece of legerdemain to a desperate stab, for it was only in that instant that Youngblood saw the bared gun in Beale's lap.

Beale hit the floor on a turning knee

and shot Hank Youngblood in the stomach. Then he fired again, with savage deliberation, as he heard another gun smash in his ears and the table go over. The second shot overlapped the first. Hank Youngblood's weasel grin turned to a grimace of astounded agony. He began to crumple.

But Beale wasn't watching him any more. He saw that Humpy Morgan was clutching a shattered elbow and howling, and he saw the smoking gun in Shanghai's hand swivel and smash lead into the forehead of a man standing at the bar. He was one of the men who had had Bullwhip surrounded. The other one had caught Bullwhip's elbow in the chin and was now dying with Bullwhip's bullet in him.

That was what Beale saw as his eyes swiveled around the room, which suddenly looked bare of onlookers and was already beginning to stink with powder smoke. Lead took him along the ribs, numbingly, and he saw the Youngblood man in the corner thumbing his sixgun again. Then Walt Riggs shot the man in the corner in the lower belly and dropped to his knee and began to hammer shots at another man who had appeared at one of the windows.

Behind the bar, the bartender reared up with a shotgun in his hands and turned the muzzle of it on Beale, the face behind it contorted with hatred. For a split second surprise and shock held Beale's mind still. But nothing held his trigger finger still. The shot slammed off almost without his knowledge or consent. It hit the barrel of the shotgun, glancing, and whipped up under the bartender's chin and came out through the top of his head.

CHAPTER VIII

NEW HAND FOR THE HELL TRAIL

ALL AT once there was an incredible silence in the saloon. It was broken by the awed voice of a townsman crawling out from under a table. "God!"

Beale saw that the man was looking at him. But he didn't know what the hombre was talking about. He was thinking of the savage, burning pain in his side, and the sick weakness in his head, and the fact that by some curious act of nature everybody he wanted to kill was dead. Everybody except Humpy Morgan and Shanghai Wardell.

He got to his feet and snarled at Shanghai, "Whyn't you kill Humpy?"

Shanghai did not reply immediately. He was busy setting up the table and carefully picking up the spilled money which had been on it.

After a moment he righted his chair and sat down in it. "Thar's your pay," he said equably.

"You let him off," Beale raged at him. "He's double-crossed us an' in the end he framed us for a gun-killin'. You could have hit him in the brisket as good as in the elbow—easier. Damn you—"

Shanghai waved a calming hand. "Now, son," he said, "I cain't exactly answer that . . ."

Beale howled at him, trembling with fury. "You'll answer me or I'll gun you down. You let him off. Why?"

Shanghai's eyes looked suddenly thoughtful. When he looked up at Beale there was something naive, almost pleading in his eyes. "He's like me," he said. "Humpy. He's crookeder than me an' he ain't got as much sense. But—he's kind of like me. He was born for trouble an' fightin'. He—he couldn't no more help tryin' to cut my throat when I'd licked him than—" He broke off. "Hell, one of us has got to kill the other some day, but—it don't have to be now."

He grinned suddenly, brilliantly. "All of us is animals, tryin' to get ours. Humpy—he's just heartier'n most. Why, shucks, he don't mean nothin', Humpy don't. I've seen him with a kid, playin'—why, you couldn't tell which was the kid." He looked suddenly acutely embarrassed.

"Take your pay an' git out," he yelled. "Don't stand there yawpin' at me."

Beale looked at the pile of bills and change on the table and snarled, "Pay?"

The killing fury began to crawl up into his brain again.

"Yeah, pay!" Shanghai bellowed at him. "You ought to be damn thankful to get it. You learned somethin', didn't you? Not much, because you're born dumb. But something. A few more years an' maybe you'll git to be a trail hand."

His voice became shrewd, almost wheedling. "Hell, a man with any gumption would git himself a pardner an' go back down the trail an' pick up them cattle got loose from us in the raid. Must be clost to a hundred head of them. Why, I'd be dern near willin' to pay five dollars a head to the man that collected 'em for me. It'd make him a stake for a herd of his own."

Beale looked at him and drew a long, unbelieving breath. "Five dollars a head! He'd be almost willing to pay that to a man who outwitted the renegades and collected lost and abandoned cattle!

The memory of his wrongs hit him again. All this old buzzard had done to him. And now . . .

The anger tried to crawl up to drown his brain again, but it could not quite make it. Even his anger seemed tired.

He drew a long, slow breath and picked the money off the table. "I don't know why I don't throw this in your face," he

said wearily. "I don't know why I don't kill you now instead of waitin' until later. I guess I'm just tired. Mebbe I want to save you to collect double later on."

He turned away, catching Walt Riggs' glance as he did so. It came to him with a sense of shock that, though Walt's face was a little gray underneath the trail tan, the kid's eyes were steady and calm.

Hell! he thought. The damn kid was toughening up!

It did not occur to him then that Walt was a year older than himself.



IT HAD not yet occurred to him when, something less than a year later, he rode alone into Whiskey Ford.

Whiskey Ford, way station on the road to Hell—and Dodge and Abilene. The names whipped along his spine like quivering flashes of heat lightning. But the thrill hardly got up to the top of his head now. He was an old-timer on the long trail.

A brash kid swaggered out of the livery barn as Beale passed, and stood with his hands on his hips looking down toward the Ford. Beale could see the jump and spark in his eyes, and he grinned.

"Fool kid," he thought indulgently.

Up at the other end of town, hoofs hammered and sixguns ripped the air. Beale grinned and walked on. He went into the barbershop and had a hot bath and a shave



and haircut and then thought that he might get something to eat. Or maybe a drink first. He crossed the street toward the swinging doors of Luke Larned's Drink Emporium. Later, he'd have some food.

Beale started toward the bar and then, through the murky smoke, a face hit him—hard-hewn, tough-eyed, set on a short neck and powerful shoulders, grinning at him.

For a moment the old, furious rancor rose in him. Shanghai Wardell!

It had been many months since he had really remembered what he meant to take out of that old, salty hide. Well, now was his chance.

He pushed over to the table, swaggering, a little, grim-mouthed. "So it's you," he said.

Shanghai greeted him with open delight. "Beale!" he shouted. "You old son of a gun! Come an' have a drink."

Beale laughed harshly and sat down at the table. "What kind of a drink?" he asked sardonically.

"The best liquor in Whiskey Ford," Shanghai shouted delightedly. "Lemme make you acquainted with Harve Henderson—a youngster that's goin' to ride the trail with Bashy Murchison's Eight Bar Cross. It's his fust time up, an' I don't think I ever see a likelier lookin' hand, barrin' you when you first rode up."

The bare-faced flattery left Beale cold-eyed. "You dern old Gila monster," he said.

For the first time, his eyes really took in the kid at the table. It was the youngster he had seen before the livery barn.

Almost with reluctance, the kid pulled his eyes away from the crowded, smoky, shouting room to look at Beale with a queer, respectful eagerness. "I reckon this ain't all so new to you," he said. "I reckon you don't get the kick out of it that I do."

Beale looked at him. "It begins to wear off after a while," he said dryly.

Shanghai cut in, shoving a short whiskey glass across to Beale and filling it from the bottle. "Sorry we ain't got nothin' bigger at the moment, son," he said, "but that'll do for a starter. What do you say—you want to sign on with me again this year? I got most of my crew, but I can always use a good man."

Beale stared at him. "Me an' Walt Riggs are runnin' our own herd up," he said. "We found some stray cattle back on the trail an' bought a herd with the proceeds."

Shanghai Wardell put back his head and roared. "An' never paid me a cent for 'em, you robbers."

All at once, something broke in Beale, like a dam letting loose in a quick, smooth flood.

"Sorry you an' Walt ain't ridin' with me," Shanghai said. "Mebbe you'd like to join up—run our herds up the trail together."

Beale laughed. "I doubt it, you old high-binder. Mebbe we'll just kind of keep behind you an' let you take the grief as it comes."

Shanghai slopped liquor into his glass. "Drink on it," he said heartily.

His left hand came up from under the table and cupped the kid's glass, and Beale could see the white powder slide in before the hot brown liquor was poured.

He knew definitely then what he had only half known before—that this kid would never ride with Murchison's Eight Bar Cross unless he, Beale, interfered. He sat for a moment with memories of the long, bitter, endless trail hitting him.

The glass stood in front of the kid's fist. The young fellow would take it and drink it down in a minute.

Beale reached out suddenly and shoved it gently toward him.

"Drink up, son," he said, his eyes sparkling. "It'll shore make a good man of you!"

THE END

A HANGROPE for the SHERIFF

By LEROY BOYD



Alec looked down at the body as he automatically reloaded.

His word of honor was more important to Sheriff Alec Hollister even than the law whose shield he wore; so important that he cracked a murderer out of jail, and was willing to die for a crime he hadn't committed—if his former friends could catch up with him!

A LEC HOLLISTER peered into the small cell at the prisoner slumped on the dirty bunk. Alec's deputy had brought the man in a little while ago for shooting Sam Crenshaw over a poker game.

The man roused and stood up, moved to the door to grasp the bars and leered at the sheriff. "Hi, Alec," he said. "Remem-

ber me, don't you—Long Jim Hackett?"

Alec knew him, sure, even though eight years had given a dissolute jib to his face. Yet he pretended not to see the outstretched hand.

"Anything I can do for you?" Alec asked. It was the stock question he put to all the prisoners who passed through his jail.

He always had a sympathy for the hombre on the wrong side of the bars, but he never let that sympathy degenerate into sentimentality. He never failed to let them know he was the lawman hereabouts.

"Not yet," Hackett said in answer to the question. Then he chuckled. "Maybe later."

Alec caught the significance of that, right between the eyes, but he wouldn't let Hackett see how hard the impact of it had been. He said with a studied indifference, "Just yell if you want something."

He turned and made his way back to his office, dropped down on a chair. For a long time he gazed absently through the open window at the town.

Since coming to Cactus Springs he'd made a record good enough to erase, at least partially, the memory of those five years when he'd traveled the owlhoot trail. The folks here didn't know about those years down in New Mexico, and he'd planned to run next election for the job of sheriff, to which the county commissioners had appointed him when the place became vacant.

But Jim Hackett, back there in the cell—if he talked he could send Alec back to Indian Wells for murder!

Alec's line of thought was broken by the entrance of Bud Morgan, his deputy, who stomped into the office and sat down. Bud swept the hat from his head and wiped the sweat from his face.

"Was just down to see the sawbones," Bud said. "Looks like Sam ain't going to make it."

Bud took a chew of Bully Boy, scratched the top of his dome where the hair was

growing thin, and cocked an eye at Alec. "Some of the boys getting interested in neckties all of a sudden."

Alec tensed and fixed a steady gaze on his deputy.

Bud slapped his hat back in place and shot an amber stream through the window. He added, "Sam didn't have a gun on him at the time."

"Won't be no lynching . . . not as long as I'm sheriff!"

"Can't stop men thinking, can you?"

Alec wanted to be alone. He made a pretense of looking at his watch. "How about going to the Chink's and getting a tray for the prisoner?"

"Don't mind," Bud said. "Might get a bite myself."

◇ ◇ ◇

WHEN his deputy had gone Alec got up and paced about the room.

He couldn't stay alone with his thoughts, however, and after a while his steps led him back to the cell.

"You all right?" he asked Hackett.

Hackett didn't bother to get up this time. He said, "Can't complain, seeing as I won't be here long."

Alec braced himself for the blow he knew was coming.

"You'll let me out of here come dark," Hackett added. "You said once if ever you could help me—"

"Sheriffs ain't in the habit of turning killers loose."

"You ought to know about that."

Hackett rolled a cigarette. He struck a match, glanced over its flame at Alec. "Heard you might be a candidate this fall."

He lit the smoke, flipped the dead match into the corridor. "People 'round here now should hear about that time you shot old man Glade—reckon that'd put a crimp in your plans, huh?"

"I never shot Glade, somebody else konked him."

"Evidence pointed to you. If somebody—say—"

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Would hate like hell to have to, Alec."

Alec's breath became a pain beneath his ribs.

Three years ago he'd come up here and worked the hard way to shake off his fugitive past. Suddenly he realized it had all been a dream, a dream Hackett could shatter.

His jaw squared pugnaciously. "I don't scare easy, Hackett," he said huskily. "I'll tell them myself!"

A trace of doubt flashed in Hackett's eyes. He covered it with a sneer. "Tell 'em—and we'll ride south together."

"You ain't riding!"

Alec left Hackett and hurried back to his office, and his determination carried him to the door. He stopped there, though, when he saw Bud coming with the supper tray. In that moment he knew he couldn't reveal his past; he valued too highly the esteem in which he was held here to throw it away by a rash act. He turned back and tossed his hat on the desk.

Bud came in and took the tray back to the prisoner. When he returned to the office he flopped down on a chair and lifted his feet to the window sill.

"Sam just cashed in his chips," he said.

Alec said nothing for several moments. Then he mumbled, "Reckon I'll go get my supper. Hand around till I get back."

"Step in to the Silver Dollar and ask Hank for a slug out of that special bottle of mine," Bud said. "You'll find some of the boys there—Rufe Wilson's telling 'em what a great friend Sam was of his."

Alec understood what Bud meant, all right, but he said nothing. He merely nodded his head and left the office. . . .

When, after supper, he stepped through the batwing doors of the saloon an ominous quiet greeted him. Hank, the barkeep, was in the act of lighting a lamp; he paused with the match in mid-air and sent a swift

look at the group at the back of the room.

Alec breasted the bar and roused Hank from his suspended action by ordering a drink. He saw Rufe Wilson approaching him, and he said, "Have one with me, Rufe?"

"Don't mind if I do," Rufe grunted.

Alec waited silently while Rufe filled the glass Hank pushed toward him.

"Got a couple of cows corralled out to the ranch," Rufe said then, holding up his glass and peering at the liquor. "Brands look like they've been worked over. How about taking a run out to see them?"

"Be glad to," Alec answered. "Next two-three days."

"Aiming to turn them cows loose first thing in the morning."

"They won't go far."

Alec had warded off the attempt to get him out of town, but if there were an exultation in his victory it vanished when he saw the grim faces of the men who had ringed him against the bar.

Rufe tried another tack. "Sam Crenshaw died a little while ago," he said.

"I know. Bud told me."

"What about the hombre who done it?"

"Jim Hackett goes before the judge tomorrow for his arraignment," Alec snapped. "He'll have a trial—fair and square—and he'll hang!"

"Waste of time," Rufe growled. "If he's going to hang anyway."

"It'll be legal, though."

Rufe appeared to ponder that a moment. He drained his glass and set it down on the bar. He said, "Don't be a fool, Alec."

Anger flashed in Alec's eyes. "Always was Pa's brightest boy," he said coldly.

The crowd moved hastily back, leaving them in a cleared space. The two glared at each other, silently and tensely. At last Alec added, "In fact I'm so smart I have a double-barrel scattergun at the jail. Both barrels loaded with buckshot. Ought to see what she does at twenty paces, Rufe!"

Alec had singled out Rufe and placed

on him the sole responsibility for what might happen, and Rufe was unwilling—at least as yet—to accept it. He relaxed suddenly, shrugged a shoulder and attempted a laugh. “No need getting riled, Alec. Hombre ain’t worth it.”

Hank grunted with relief and barked that the drinks were on the house. The crowd pushed around them once more.

Alec tossed down his drink and left as soon as he could get away. As he passed through the swinging doors a tightening of the muscles of his back warned him he hadn’t entirely extinguished the flames of the mob spirit. It needed only a favorable breeze to fan it into an open fire—and Rufe was quite a blowhard when he had a few drinks under his belt.

Alec stepped out into the street, and behind him the murmur of voices rose to a crescendo. There was little he could do about that, though, and he headed in the direction of the jail.



WHEN Alec entered his office he saw that his deputy had laid the shotgun and two rifles on the desk. “Just had a confab with Rufe,” Alec said. “Wanted to get me out of town.”

Bud took a fresh chew of tobacco and made use of the window. “Fat chance you’ll have getting elected if anything happens to this hombre back here tonight.” He shook his head solemnly. “And then if nothing does happen—”

Alec moved over to the window and gazed absently at the lights of the town. The matter of the election wasn’t on his mind now, but rather if his duty as a sheriff outweighed the promise he had given Hackett once. This question in itself might not have been so hard to settle, but it had become complicated by the fact that if Hackett, in an attempt to save his own neck, should talk, he, Alec, would no longer have any duty. Or respectability!

He turned at last to Bud. “Way I figure,” he said, “we could stay here and fight them off when they come . . . but somebody’d get hurt. Best to keep them from ever starting. Maybe you’d better go out and mill around with the boys. If it does look like they’re about to stampede hurry back so’s we’ll be together.”

Bud got up with mock bravado, pulled his hat to a rakish angle and swaggered out.

As soon as he was gone Alec walked behind his desk and sat down, desperately tried to solve his dilemma. His head ached from the effort of it, but a solution failed to materialize in his thoughts.

After a bit he heard the banging of the cell door and Hackett’s yelling. He lifted himself to his feet and went back to put a stop to it.

“Alec,” Hackett croaked when he saw him. “Glad it’s you—”

“What’s wrong?”

“What’re they saying in town—what’re they saying about me?” A fleck of saliva rolled down from his lips to wet the stubble of beard on his chin.

Alec’s eyes fastened on the man, and disgust filled him as he perceived Hackett’s fear. He growled, “Nothing to worry about.”

“You can’t fool me, Alec. They’re coming to lynch me!” Like an animal whose instincts are sharpened by danger, Hackett had become intuitively aware of the feeling in the town.

He pulled himself erect. He said, “If I’m to go out tonight—let me have a gun so I can go like a man!”

“We’ll see—”

Hackett’s resolution evaporated before Alec’s hesitancy. It had been nothing but an illusion after all!

“If I had a horse I could get away,” Hackett whined.

“And what about me?”

“You’ve got to help me, see? I helped you once, down there in Lonesome Steer Canyon, eight years ago. If that posse had

found you they'd have strung you up sure. But I run on to you and showed you that back way to the Border—kept the bunch on a false trail so's you could get away."

Alec broke out in a cold sweat. Hackett's hand came through the bars to touch him, and he moved back out of reach.

He'd never been able to understand how he'd got on the owlhoot trail; it had been just one of those things. He'd been on his way to Fort Yaquemi—hadn't even known Glade was dead and his bank robbed until Hackett found him there in the canyon and told him he was wanted for the crime and a price had been put on his head. Said it would be well to run for it and when things cooled off he could clear his name. But a couple months later he'd seen one of the dodgers that had been put out on him.

"It's just like you owe me a debt," Hackett mumbled.

Alec muttered a curse, and his fists clenched so tightly that the nails drew blood from his palms.

He could turn Hackett loose and ride away with him. And yet he didn't want to go with him.

He made his way outside and went around the building to saddle Hackett's horse. When that was done he returned to the cell and herded Hackett into the office. From a drawer of his desk he got the man's belt and gun and tossed them to him.

Hackett caught the belt; his fingers wrapped eagerly around the gun-butt.

Alec saw the motion and said, "The gun's not loaded, Hackett."

Hackett gave no sign he had heard. He buckled on the belt and looked at Alec. He said, "Coming?"

"No!"

A sardonic grin twisted Hackett's lips. "I won't be forgetting, Alec. And if you should decide to hit the trail again look me up down San Antone way. . . ."

An hour later the roar of a gun smashed the night. Before the racket had died away

Bud rushed in. "They'll be coming pretty soon," he reported.

Alec lifted his eyes to Bud. He said slowly, "Hackett's gone!"

Bud stared at him incredulously. He ran back to the cell, and when he returned his face was contemptuous.

"How much did you get?" he sneered.

Alec shook his head. "It was the other way around."

"You damn fool! Don't you know that hombre is wanted down at Indian Wells in New Mexico for murder—for shooting some fellow—Glade, I think—"

"What! Say that again, Bud!"

"First they thought it was some young ranny done it, but then they found out it was this Hackett. If you'd read them dodgers we get 'stead of leaving it all to me, you'd have known!"

Alec's face had turned white in the pale lamp light. He saw now what Hackett had done to him.

He stood up, and his chair crashed to the floor behind him. "Got to go," he said hoarsely.

Bud's gun was out. "No you don't!" he barked. "When Rufe and the boys come they're going to want to know the answers."

"But—"

"Give me that star; you ain't sheriff no more. I'm taking over."

Alec glared at him a moment. Then he unpinned the badge from his shirt and handed it towards his deputy. "Guess you win."

Bud was caught off guard; the muzzle of his gun swerved as he reached for the star. In that instant Alec's fist landed on his jaw.

The gun belched fire. Bud, though, had been dazed, and the bullet plunked harmlessly into the 'dobe wall.

Alec jerked his own sixgun and slammed its barrel against the side of Bud's head. With a groan the deputy went down.

As Alec stared down at Bud his ears caught the sound of the mob at the saloon

working itself into a frenzy to charge the jail. Yet he appeared unhurried as he holstered his gun and pinned the sheriff's star on his shirt again.

He leaned over and blew out the lamp. He stood up and his determination was like a hard rock in his chest. He went out to get his horse. . . .

It was just coming daybreak when Alec finally caught up with Hackett on the road that led to Texas.

The outlaw had stopped in the yard of an abandoned sod and 'dobe cabin at Hanan's Crossing to let his horse rest and crop grass before pushing on. Seeing somebody coming from the north, he hid in some cottonwoods, and when Alec put his cayuse across the creek he stepped forth and hailed him.

"Anybody behind you?" Hackett asked.

"I came alone."

Hackett gave him a welcoming grin and dropped his sixgun back in its holster. "Light and stretch your legs. Be pushing on pretty soon. . . . Better get shed of that star, though, 'cause where we're going it ain't healthy to wear them things."

Alec climbed wearily from his saddle, and his horse moved back to the creek to drink. He faced Hackett. "This is as far as I go."

Hackett's eyes narrowed. "How come?"

"Found out last night who really did murder Glade!"

Hackett forced a laugh. "You wouldn't be holding that against me now, would

you? Anyway, we're both in the same boat now—after last night."

"You're wrong, Hackett, about the boat. I'm going back—and I'm taking you with me."

Hackett scowled blackly. "Ain't you forgetting something? That posse *would* have hung you if they'd caught you that time. You owed me a debt, and you—"

"Whatever obligation there was I paid it last night when I opened that cell door. There's no interest due."

Hackett went for his gun, for even a rat will fight when cornered. He leveled the weapon hastily and fired.

As Alec's hand started downward he felt the tug of his shirt as the slug whipped past. Hackett fired again, and the bark of his gun was seconded by the bellow of another.

A hurt, surprised look spread over Hackett's features. For half a moment he stood uncertainly, as if unable to believe what had happened. Slowly his knees buckled, and his body sprawled on the ground.

Alec looked down at the body as he automatically reloaded. Then he gazed grimly back along the trail over which he had come. In the far distance he saw a small cloud of dust. That would be Bud and some of the boys. Maybe Rufe, too.

But he didn't care. He'd done his duty as a sheriff.

And if he *had* owed a debt, he'd paid it all.

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of Big Book Western Magazine, published bi monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1942. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the Big Book Western Magazine, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 26th day of October, 1942. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 18, Register's No. 4W359. (My commission expires March 30, 1944.) [Seal]—Form 3626—Ed. 1933.

HIS HONOR PACKS A GUN

By PAUL S. HELLER

ONE of the most famous of the early frontier judges was Jim Burnett, who flourished in Arizona during the late Eighties. Burnett originally derived his authority from the Pima County Board of Supervisors. Having trouble with the board over his fees, though, he decided to secede from its jurisdiction, and announced that in the future, "this court will take care of itself." Thereafter Burnett ignored the county authorities, and put all fees into his own pocket.

Burnett's brand of justice was not ex-

actly even-handed. When an innocent Mexican was shot down by a friend of the judge, the coroner's jury, acting under orders from Burnett, delivered the famous verdict that "it served the Mexican right for getting in front of the gun."

Judge Burnett issued his own warrants, and served them with a shotgun. Court was declared in session at whatever place the judge happened to collar his man.

The legal procedure was simple. Burnett would sight his shotgun, declare court open, state the charge against his prisoner,

Salty, hard-hitting justice rode high in the saddle back in the days when His Honor packed a gun—and used it to back made-to-order statutes hundreds of miles from the nearest law book. . . .



When they met on a Tombstone street they went for their guns and settled their differences.

and assess the fine. The defendant had no choice but to pay up on the spot.

Burnett's fines were not always demanded in money. He had long had an eye on some fine three-year-old steers owned by Jack Haarer, a local desperado. When Haarer got drunk one day and started shooting up the town, Burnett saw his chance. Running up to the cowboy, the justice dragged him from his horse and fined him twenty head of three-year-old steers. And Haarer had to pay. Burnett's income from the fines he collected in this way, and from his custom of buying and selling cattle that "strayed" across the Border, became quite substantial.

One day Burnett fined Jawbone Clark, who ran a dancehall in Charleston, fifty dollars for being drunk. After collecting the fine from the indignant Jawbone, Burnett wandered into a poker game, where he was quickly separated from his recent assessment.

"S'cuse me, folks," said the justice, rising from the table. "I got a little judicial business to 'tend to."

A short time later the surprised Jawbone found himself looking once more into the muzzle of Burnett's shotgun.

"Hear ye, hear ye, court is now in session," Burnett intoned solemnly. "Jawbone Clark, the court finds you guilty of disturbing the peace, and fines you fifty dollars."

"See here," cried the outraged Jawbone, "I jest paid yuh a fifty dollar fine."

"That was fer being drunk," Burnett said placidly. "This is fer the additional charge of disturbin' the peace."

And Jawbone, looking down the muzzle of Burnett's shotgun, decided to pay.

Several minutes later, Burnett was back in the poker game. "I jest got through with that little judicial business," he explained as he seated himself. "Gimme fifty dollars more in chips, please."

Burnett once bearded Curly Bill, the outlaw, and got a shotgun assessment of

twenty-five dollars out of him. Curly had interrupted church services the day before, and had made the frightened minister preach a special sermon for him and his cronies. The following morning, Justice Burnett was out hunting for Curly.

He found him dozing in front of a saloon, and prodded him in the ribs. When the outlaw opened his eyes, he was a little disturbed to find himself gazing down the barrel of Burnett's shotgun.

"Curly Bill, hear ye, hear ye," chanted the justice, "this honorable court is now in session, and you are hereby tried and convicted on the charge of illegally, unlawfully, and without warrant of law, breaking up the church services in the schoolhouse last night. And it is the judgment of this here court, to wit: that you be fined twenty-five dollars, and that you pay this here fine forthwith, immediately, and at once."

"P'int that hardware the other way, Jim, and I'll give you the money," said Curly, good-naturedly taking a roll of bills out of his pocket.

The outlaw used to tell this story on himself with a good deal of amusement. "And that low-down, onery old robber," he would chuckle, "who didn't know no more 'bout law than a range bull, kept them two barrels of his'n p'inted right between my eyes till I paid him that fine."

Burnett came to a bad end early in the Nineties. The judge had acquired a ranch on the San Pedro adjoining that of William C. Green, a famous pioneer mining man. Green built a dam across the river in spite of the violent objections of the judge. Some time later, the dam was blown up, and Green's little girl, who was playing on the river bank, was drowned in the flood.

Green believed that Burnett was to blame, although the judge denied it and no evidence of his guilt ever turned up. Nevertheless, there was bitter animosity between the two men, and one day when they met on a Tombstone street they went

for their guns and settled their differences. Green shot and killed Burnett.



ANOTHER famous Arizona justice was Charles H. Meyer, of Tucson. The only point of similarity between Meyer and Burnett was that both knew very little law. There the resemblance ended.

Meyer was a just, honest man, Dutch by birth and a druggist by profession. Report had it that his law library consisted of two books: a volume on *Materia Medica*, and one on fractured bones. When any fine legal point troubled him, he sought for a solution in one of these volumes.

Meyer instituted a chain gang system in Tucson, whereby every person convicted in his court was given the opportunity to work for the city. This kept Tucson's streets spotless, and was more of a deterrent to crime than a mere stay in jail.

One day, when a defendant was about to be sentenced, his lawyer protested, "My client objects to being tried by this court, on the ground of prejudice, and demands a trial by jury."

"Py a shury!" cried the judge. "Phat is dat shury?"

"He insists that he be tried by his peers," the attorney replied.

"Oh, he does, does he? Vell, I sentence him to two weeks in de shain gang, and I sentence you to von week for disrespect of the court. Now, how do you like dat trial by shury?"

Judge Meyer knew nothing about juries or peers, but a good deal about tricky, wily men. And he wasn't going to let any legal technicalities prevent him from giving them their desserts. Methods of this sort made him the terror of crooked lawyers.

One day a rascal named Wolf swindled some Indians out of three dollars, and was brought before the court. Meyer found it difficult to establish Wolf's guilt. Nothing

in this volume on fractured bones seemed to throw any light on the proper procedure to follow. Meyer decided to adjourn the court and consult a lawyer he could trust.

Sitting with Wolf after court had temporarily adjourned, Meyer remarked, "Volf, id is de unanimous opinion of dis community dat you are a tief, and dis court coincides in dat opinion."

Wolf jumped up and shook his fist in Meyer's face. "Judge, I don't let any man talk to me like that!" he yelled.

"Dis court fines you ten dollars for raising your fist against it," the judge replied calmly. "And into the shain gang you go until the fine is paid."

Since there was no higher court to which he could appeal, Wolf was forced to pay the fine.



Early frontier courtrooms saw some unusual legal proceedings. There was the time that District Attorney L. D. Miller of Texas had a dispute with an opponent concerning some point of law.

"Your Honor," said Miller to the judge, "that is not the law."

The other lawyer insisted that it was. Whereupon Miller made him a sporting proposition.

"I'll bet you ten dollars it's not the law," he cried.

His opponent tried to ignore Miller's offer, but the D.A. was persistent.

"Money talks," said Miller.

The opposing lawyer did not have the ten dollars, and looked imploringly at the judge.

But to his horror, the judge firmly supported Miller. "If you hain't got the nerve to kiver his ten, you must be wrong, and the court rules agin you," said His Honor.

A lawyer had to be prepared for anything in those days. There was the time that an expert on prevarication made his appearance in the courtroom. This was the

brain-child of Mike Sutton, a resourceful Kansas lawyer.

The testimony of a certain witness was losing Mike his case, and he cast about desperately for some means of discrediting him. Suddenly a bright idea struck him. He would introduce an expert on prevarication, who would testify that the witness was a liar.

Buffalo Jones, town-builder, was sitting in the court at the time. Mike called him to the stand. After some preliminary questions, Sutton came to the point.

"Mr. Jones, has your wide experience and observation given you the ability to tell, from a man's expression, actions, and manner of speaking, whether or not he is a liar?"

"It has," Mr. Jones replied promptly.

"You are something of a liar yourself, are you not?"

"I am," agreed Jones placidly.

"Have you carefully observed the ex-

pression, actions, and manner of speech of the man who has just left the stand?"

"I have."

"Is it your considered opinion, as an expert on prevarication, that the witness is a liar?"

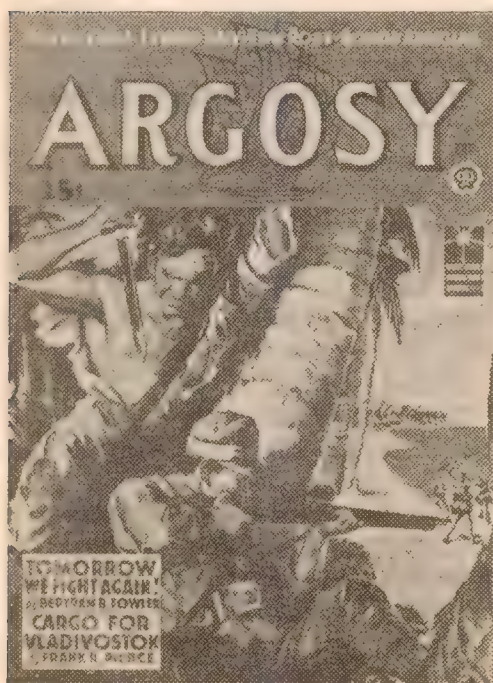
Jones was always glad to be of any service to Mike. "My considered opinion as an expert on prevarication," he said gravely, "is that the witness is a liar."

Mike turned triumphantly to the judge. It was in vain that the opposing attorney protested. The judge upheld Sutton.

"It is the opinion of this court," ruled His Honor, "that Mike Sutton understands his business and would introduce no incompetent testimony."

And that was that.

Courts were never dull in those days of the early frontier. Judges were not awed by legal technicalities. His Honor often made his own law, and stood ready to back it up with his hardware.



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Anger flashed in
Don Alberto's face.
"Do we pass?"



A bloodthirsty Spanish don and his entourage of cutthroats finally learned from a buckskinned Texas graybeard that it doesn't pay to play both ends against the middle—especially when Death holds each end!

White-Skinned Savage

By G. ARTHUR ALAN

DAWN came cold and clear to the rolling sage flats of West Texas. As the first streaks of gray tipped the eastern sky a Comanche war whoop

carried loud on the still wind, and the pound of pony hoofs lifted to a mad, deafening roar. A hundred braves charged down on the little scattering of ranch build-

ings on the flat. Death rolled thunderously across the prairie. . . .

Within the cabin a boy of twelve leaped awake at the first yell from the marauding Indians. "Pa!" he yelled. "Pa! Pa! Injuns!"

A shaggy-haired middle-aged man threw the blankets from him as he leaped from another bunk and reached for his buffalo gun against the wall. Rifles were popping outside, and lead and arrows smashed into the walls of the cabin. The shaggy-headed settler died before he reached his rifle as a barrage of lead poured through one of the paneless windows. Beside him, a frail, work-worn woman sank silently to the dirt floor, a long arrow shaft deep in her breast.

In one corner a little girl of five screamed and began to cry. The boy picked up his father's gun and emptied it through a window before a dozen slugs found their mark in his body and he wilted beneath the window. For a moment all was still within the cabin, save for the broken sobbing of the little girl. Then a painted brave shouldered roughly inside. His scalping knife flashed in the dawnlight. The little girl screamed again, and the brave held aloft a golden-haired scalp-lock—prize trophy for his wampum.

It was a matter of moments before the corraled horses and nearby loose stock were gathered and driven hurriedly westward. The cabin and outbuildings were fired, and a pyre rose to those who had died there. Death struck swiftly on the prairie. . . .

Indian raids such as this were common in the sparsely settled sections of West Texas and New Mexico in the early '70's. Many times they were not mere tribal uprisings, but raids instigated by white men who carried on a profitable business with the Indians for stolen stock from lonely ranches.

These cunning traders who dealt in death and treachery became known on the frontier as Los Comancheros. So extensive were their operations that they had regular

rendezvous where they met to barter with the Indians. One of these was on the Rio los Lenguas—Tongue River—and another was in Valle de los Lagrimas—Valley of Tears.

One of the most cruel and treacherous of the Comancheros was Don Alberto Filores de la Mora Alvarado. He was of high Spanish birth, was well-educated and a prosperous merchant in old Santa Fe. His many *carretas* were always on the trails, filled with cheap rifles, whiskey, trinkets and tripe from Santa Fe to trade with the Indians for cattle, horses and other valuables stolen from the settlements and lonely Texas ranches. So brutal and bloodthirsty was he that even among his own hard-bitten following he was known as El Carnicero—The Butcher.

Often he would ride to some high promontory and watch with greedy eyes the redskins plunder, burn and pillage some ranch or settlement below. Sick at sight of such carnage, one of his chief henchmen, Miguel Salvadra, would often cross himself and whisper, "Madre de Dios! They are devils, señor—devils!"

But the dark-visaged Don Alberto would laugh in contempt and slap his *compadre* on the shoulder. "Huh! Si, Miguel of the chicken heart. Si, they are devils! But what of eet? They make us reech, Ho no! Ha-ha-ha-ha!"



BUT El Carnicero made one mistake. That mistake was to take his *carreta* loads of whiskey and trinkets through Raton Pass to meet with the Indians somewhere beyond. He hadn't counted on a little frowsy-whiskered, buckskin-clad mountain man known as Uncle Dick Wooten, who had settled in the pass, built a toll road there, and a huge log inn known as the Toll House.

When El Carnicero's caravan came up they found Uncle Dick standing there

spraddle-legged at the mouth of the pass, an ancient long rifle slung from one shoulder, barring the way. Don Alberto halted his horse.

"You dispute our passage, señor?"

Uncle Dick rocked back on his moccasined feet and regarded the don with cocked head. "Waal, waal," he grunted, "if'n we ain't honored! Long time no see, greaser. Still peddlin' junk to the Injuns?"

Anger flashed in Don Alberto's face. "We have leetle time to waste in idle talk, señor!" he shouted. "Do we pass?"

"It'll cost yuh money," Uncle Dick drawled. "Yuh see, since I built the road through here I charge a toll on anything goin' through. Decent folks an' honest-to-God traders go through mighty cheap, but to skunks o' your stripe, with the kind of junk you're carryin', the charge is damn high. A thousand pesos per wagon!"

"A thousand pesos!" the don screamed. "Señor, you are crazy! Miguel! Pedro! Drive on! Ride thees fool down!"

"I wouldn't," Uncle Dick cautioned, but already it was too late. Miguel Salvadra, on the lead carreta, had whipped the oxen into a lumbering run. Uncle Dick leaped quickly behind a boulder to one side of the

road. A ball from his long rifle dropped the lead oxen in its tracks. The carreta swayed as the second ox pulled at the traces and lurched sideways across the road.

Uncle Dick jammed fresh loads into his old weapon. Bullets were already hammering against the boulder behind which he crouched as Don Alberto's men took cover among the rocks. Miguel Salvadra, leaping hurriedly for safety, slumped silently behind a rock as Wooten's gun barked a second time. Splinters of granite stung the salty little old-timer's face. A chance slug ripped through the fringed buckskin of Wooten's forearm. But inexorably, one by one, he picked off Don Alberto's men.

Then it was all over, save for Don Alberto spurring madly away, fleeing the spot where his men had died. Wooten raised the long rifle again and fired. Don Alberto's horse screamed in agony as the bullet struck it. Alberto yelled as the animal pitched near to the edge of the cutbank, then plunged crazily into the abyss.

Uncle Dick rose from behind the boulder, opened the breech of his ancient piece and blew the smoke from the barrel. El Carnicero had paid with his life for the many lives he had caused to be taken. . . .



Adventure Starts the New Year . . . Packed With Thrills!

It was the bombing of Cavite that brought that damn cat on board the *Perch*. We'd been a lucky submarine till then. . . . That's the way Commander Charles T. S. Gladden's—"THE CAT AND THE PERCH"—slides down the ways for a voyage through the China Sea, full of hell and Japs.

"They got clean away," the little Filipino corporal said, grinning through his bandages. "I hope they managed to get a gun." . . . That's how T. F. Tracy's novelette—"SOMETHING TO SHOOT AT"—begins, to the accompaniment of wailing sirens and the crack of a sentry's rifle.

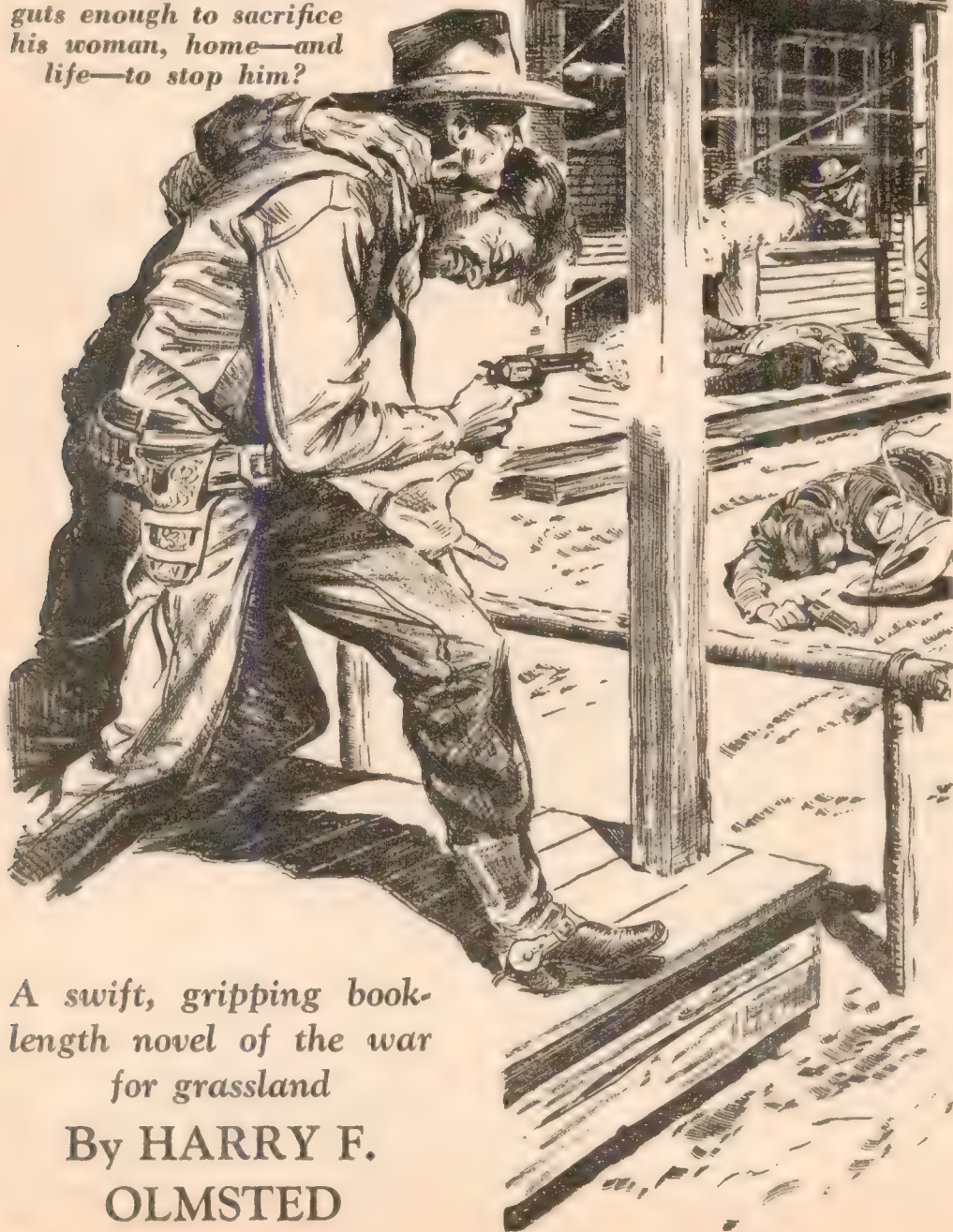
It was all very well for the Old Man to declare he would never give up the ship. That wasn't the question—the ship was giving up Captain Scudder. You could feel it going with your ankles. . . . That's the opening of Richard Howells Watkins'—"A SHIFT OF CARGO"—the stirring account of a freighter's unconvoyed run to the Caribbean.

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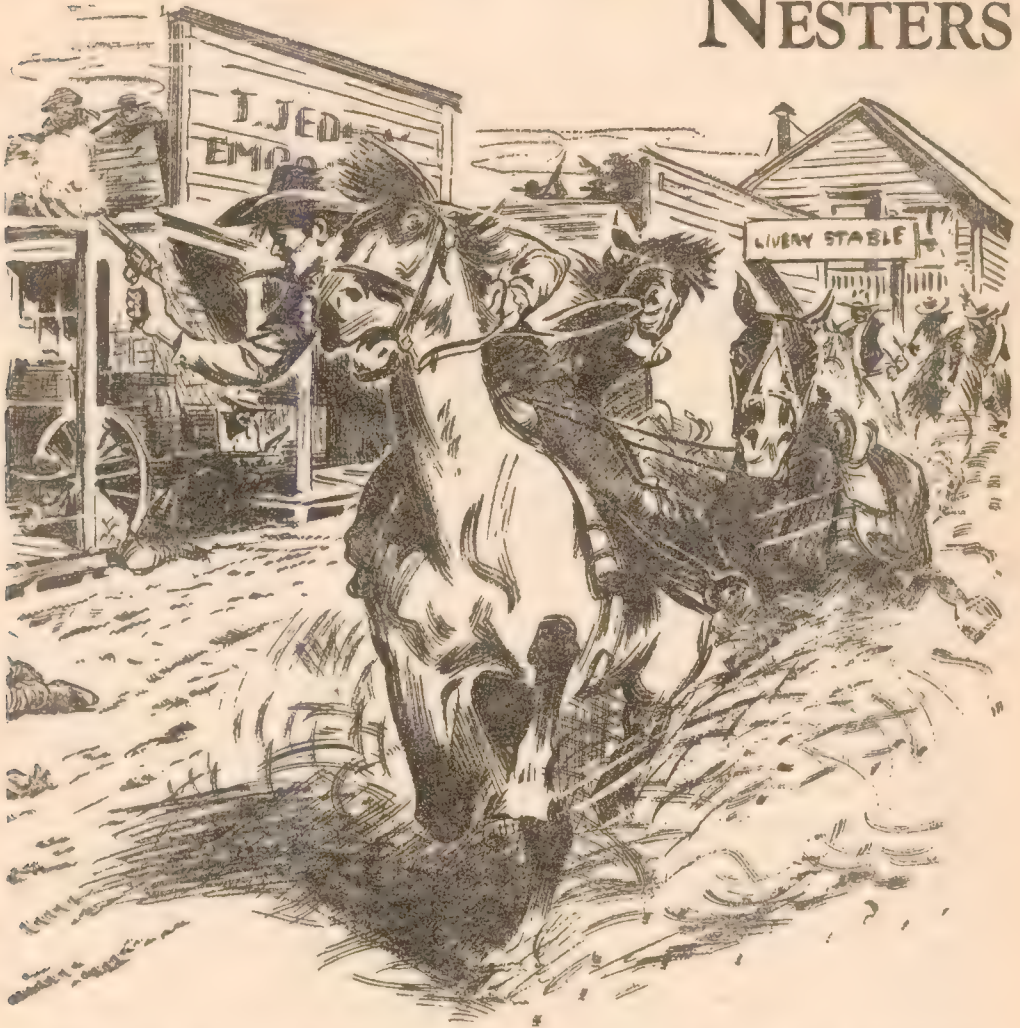
Doug Eyton vowed that he'd repay in blood that Judas partner who had killed two men and sent a third to a wilderness of wanted thieves. But when the traitor showed on honest Catamount range, backed by bought-and-paid-for law and a lust to smash a pioneer empire, would Eyton have guts enough to sacrifice his woman, home—and life—to stop him?



A swift, gripping book-length novel of the war for grassland

By HARRY F.
OLMSTED

GUN CALL FOR FIGHTING NESTERS



Old Rip was just emerging, his pistol spitting, his knees bowed by the weight of the wounded Blazer hanging desperately to him.

Chapter I

GUN CUB PLAYS 'ER OUT

DOU G EYTON lay in his blankets, smelling the scent of the dawn and listening to the snoring of Rip Rafferty beside him. How the hell could Rip sleep on a morning like this? In the pallid light Doug studied the blanketed

forms lying about the dead fire. Tiny McBane, too tall for his blanket, too tough to feel the frost. Blazer Cane, whose yarning about robberies had inspired the day's business of robbery. Waspy Jones, one-time lawman, who brooded eternally over shrunken fortunes.

Funny how he and Rip had come by these hard-bitten saddlemates. Several years before, running from a Kiowa raid

that had orphaned him, Doug had fallen in with Rip Rafferty, hauling supplies to his Colorado ranch. What started as a lift became company for two lonely souls. Rip, owning nothing but his nester holding, his horses and memories, was broke, licked by a two-year drought. It helped to have a strong, willing youth like Doug to share the bitterness of defeat.

The day finally came to leave Rip's busted hopes and strike north, riding the grubline and looking for work. Times were bad and everywhere men were adrift—good men, bad men, men with hope turned to gall. Such men, denied work, naturally gravitate into bands which connive to defeat starvation. Then Blazer Cane suggested the bank job. Rip, vetoing it, might have prevailed if he'd had a better plan to eat. Tex Jardine, a tall man with a flair for leadership, finally whipped them all in to line—all except Rip.

"I'm down low," Rafferty acknowledged, "but not that low. I want clean hands to meet my friends. Go ahead and be crooked. Me and the boy'll dust."

"And turn us in to some sheriff for bounty, eh?" Jardine was grim. "Not much. Take cards like the rest of us, or—"

"Doug ain't robbin' no bank!" Rip barked. "Understand that, Jardine."

The tall Texan shrugged. "Then he'll fill a grave."

"Try to damage that boy, feller," Rafferty said, "and you got me to kill."

"We'll attend to that," Jardine said, "if you don't play."

Doug, holding aloof, suddenly flamed. He loved Rip even more than he had his own dad. This threat infuriated him. He smashed a fist into Jardine's face.

Staggered, Jardine righted himself, struck and missed. Doug felt powerful arms encircle him, the man's sharp chin sink into his chest, bending him back. Rip slashed at Jardine and went down under Waspy's swinging gun barrel. Doug broke free, smashed at Jardine's face again. Then

Tiny, the dumb ox, caught Jardine and held him. A great roar came from his powerful lungs.

"Stop it!" he boomed. "We gotta fight other fellers, don't we? Sure! Then we sure as hell'll get licked if we fight among ourselves. Quit it, Jardine! Let the kid alone!"

The logic of it brought them all to their senses. Rip, sitting up, felt gingerly of the knot on his head. Doug spat blood. Jardine's nostrils oozed crimson.

"Tiny's plumb right," Blazer Cane said. "Straighten up and quit quarrelin'. Jardine, how about that bank?"

"I'll go in and case the job," the Texan muttered, dabbing at his nose. "Be back come moon-up."

But Jardine hadn't returned at moon-rise. And now, with dawn breaking, he was still not back. It filled Doug with apprehension. He crawled out of his blankets, chopped wood and got a fire going. He had filled the coffee pot when Tex came galloping in, rousing the sleepers.

"Root outa there, you drowsin' turtles!" Jardine bawled. "We got work to do, and I don't mean hard labor. Pull on yore boots, oil up your cutters, swallow a bait of chuck and we'll start down the road to easy street!"

They came piling out, blinking owlishly. "Where the hell you been all this time?" Tiny growled, and, with the others, moved to the fire to hear Tex's detailed appraisal of their problem.

The man had taken all night to case the job, measuring distances, locating points of vantage for each man. Tex himself was to guard the rear of the bank and the get-away route. Waspy would be posted to command one boardwalk, Tiny the other. Doug would hold the horses. Rip Rafferty and Blazer Cane, self-admitted veteran in such enterprises, would enter the bank.

They discussed it while breakfast was being prepared. Rip didn't say a word, only watched Doug with brooding eyes. When

the food was served, they drew apart and Rip spoke.

"I've never planned to live yore life fer yuh, Doug," he murmured. "But here's once I want you to mind me. Fer us older fellers, it don't matter so much. But fer you, jest a kid, this job is burnin' yore britches behind yuh. Finish yore breakfast, hop onto your pony an' light out for something honest."

"After all you've done for me," Doug said, "you expect me to quit you? Not any! How about swallerin' some of yore own preachin', Rip? If you'll go, I will."

Rip smiled bleakly. "You see how they feel about it, lad. They'll never let us both go. But with me coverin' you, they'll never hinder yore goin'. Git!"



IT WAS the first time Doug had refused to obey his foster-father. And Rip understood and was proud. Hours later, when they dismounted behind a cutbank that hid them from the town, Rip whispered his last injunction.

"I got a nasty feelin', son, that it ain't all goin' smooth," he said slowly. "If guns start poppin', don't you come up an' show yoreself. No use you gettin' foul with the law."

Doug remembered that and trembled with excitement as he held the horses and peered over the cutbank at the town. Tiny and Waspy were posted before saloons on opposite sides of the street and plainly visible to Doug. Of Tex, he could see only the brim of his hat as he peered around a rear corner of the bank. Rip and Blazer had just climbed the steps and entered the bank's front door.

A muted yell ran through Mescalero town. The muffled echo of a gunshot came and Tiny stumbled and fell. Leaden sleet from the bank. A rifle spoke on the street swept the walks. Doug saw Waspy fire once, then turn to run between buildings.

Doug's eyes flicked to Tex Jardine. The man was plainly visible now, facing at a right angle to Doug. His rifle had leaped to his shoulder, was aimed along the rear building line. Paralyzed with the suddenness of the disaster, Doug wondered why Tex held his fire. He saw Waspy break into the clear, swerving toward the horses. Jardine fired and Waspy fell. Doug knew the answer then. Tex had sold them out!

The knowledge jarred the youth from his cold inertia. With a curse, he drew his gun and blazed away at Tex. His bullet knocked the man down but, before Doug could fire again, Tex had jumped up and vanished behind the bank building.

Whimpering, Doug rose to the saddle. He saw them coming along the bank of the draw—the men tipped off to watch the ponies and finish any business uncompleted by the ambushade in the town. He fired at them, laughing as they jumped over the cutbank and into the willows. Cutting loose three of the horses, Doug led two up the cutbank and loped toward the bank building, where old Rip was just emerging, his pistol spitting, his knees bowed by the weight of the wounded Blazer hanging desperately to him.

Doug galloped up as Rip and Blazer gained the walk; he kept his pistol busy as they climbed painfully into the saddles. A bullet cut through his left arm, numbing it. Another screamed off his saddlehorn. Still another burned across his shoulder blades.

The air was full of lead. Gunpowder swirled along the street and the false fronts hurled back the echoes of the firing. It seemed incredible that anything could live in that hell. And yet those three men did.

Blazer Cane was able to cling to the horn for the first few miles. After that he had to be held in the saddle. He died at full gallop, about four that afternoon, and they rode away from him, with the posse coming up swiftly. Old Rip had four wounds. Doug had three.

A county line turned the posse back. An

empty cabin in the friendly mountains offered Rip and Doug refuge. A week they remained there, licking their wounds, Doug condemning himself that he hadn't killed the traitor Jardine, Rip brooding that the youth had revealed himself to Mescalero law and must henceforth live under its shadow.

Finally they reckoned it was time to leave the cabin. They were healed now, strong again and filled with impatience. Snow clouds were threatening the highlands and this was no place to be caught without grub. Somewhere to the west were friendly valleys and they planned to head toward them the next morning.

When Doug woke up, with the sun streaming in the window, Rip had gone. On the cabin table was an old felt hat that somebody had left there. Scrawled on the brim, with a cartridge lead, was Rip's farewell message:

Kid: Go west. Stay straight. Don't talk.
I'll get Tex. See you sometime. Luck.

Rip.

Doug's lip trembled and there was an ache in his heart as he made ready to leave. In all his life, even after the Indian affair that had cost him both mother and father, he had never felt so alone. He didn't blame Rip, knowing that the older man felt he would only hold the youngster back. That was dead wrong, he knew, but the stubborn old coot never would admit it. Doug didn't try to trail his foster-father. He mounted, buttoned his frayed coat against the mountain chill and rode westward. Where in the world was a place for a twenty-year-old drifter, wanted by a vindictive law, and with no record of rangeland employment behind him?



DOU EYTON found that place far to the west, in Catamount Basin. His tiny campfire blazed in the willows near the creek. His pony snorted

softly and cropped the lush grass at the end of its picket rope. Doug was lonely, but he was also hungry. Loneliness must wait.

His Indian-style fire burned smokelessly and with white hot flame at the hub of sticks radiating outward. That bank affair in Mescalero had changed the manner of his living and the calmness of his thinking. It wasn't so much that the law might still be clinging to his trail as that the experience had given him the wariness of the hunted.

The can with his coffee in it boiled and he lifted it off to settle. He dipped a skinned green willow stick into another can in which he had mixed a batter. This he held over the coals, turning until the batter cooked and browned the gunbarrel bread. When the pile of bread matched his appetite, he held the prong-spitted rabbit over the fire to roast. Not much of a meal, he thought, but better than what Tiny and Blazer and Waspy got. He sank his teeth into the juicy meat and sighed. Yeah, a heap better. . . .

Hoofbeats halted the meal. Doug listened, then laid the rabbit on a rock and drew his gun. Shadows loomed as horsemen shoved through the brush screen.

"No you don't, feller!" a man bawled. "Put up that gun! If you don't I'll damn well figure you want trouble!"

Three horsemen came into the ring of firelight, stiff and ready until Doug holstered his pistol. Then they dismounted and rattled their spurs to the fire.

"Hell," a cowboy said. "Jackrabbit. I'd of swore I smelt beef, with rustler sauce."

A man with bowed legs let his eyes linger on Doug. He neither smiled nor scowled, but under the brim of his hat his dark eyes appraised Doug carefully.

"Saw yore fire, son," he said, not unkindly, "and rode in to look you over. Number of reasons why we've gotta make strangers' business our business."

Doug shrugged, hunkered and went to

work on his rabbit again. "I ain't no rustler, if that's what you mean."

"Which same," said the short-statured man, "brings up the question of just what you are."

"I'm driftin'," Doug said. "Cow business ain't all it should be in the prairie country."

One of the cowboys came rattling up. "His horse is wearin' R's Connected—a plumb strange brand. It shows long travel."

"Driftin', eh?" There was something in the short man's bearing that commanded Doug's respect. "A man drifts for more'n one reason, son."

"All I want is a ridin' job," Doug said wearily. "I can't find nobody that's hiring."

"I ain't exactly what you might call hirin'," the stocky man said, "but I could use a hand. Such little as I've seen, I like. You meet a man's eyes without shiftin'. It's plain," he smiled as he looked at the vanishing rabbit, the can-boiled coffee and the gun-barrel bread, "that you make the most of the least—a good recommend these days. Yeah, if you like the idea, we'll set and smoke till you've et. Then we'll ride to the ranch and let you pick out a bunk."

"John Troutman," said the older of the two cowboys, "if you hadn't made fools of all of us with your crazy ideas, I'd have plenty to say about signin' on a ridge runnin' maverick like this 'un. But—aw, hell, let it go! I reckon it won't bust the Rafter T, one way or another."

That's how Doug Eyton came to the big Rafter T. During those difficult first days, when the Troutman cowpunchers shunned him and every device was visited upon him to test his mettle, Doug found comfort from an unexpected source. Tana—John Troutman's motherless, tomboy daughter—was about to leave for some school far to the east, and the thought made her as miserable and lonely as Doug found himself.

It was natural they should come together for sympathy. Doug, little more than a

handy man about the ranch at first, had occasion to do more than a few favors for the girl. She smuggled him taffy she had pulled and almost frightened him to death when she suggested:

"Let's you and me get married, Doug, and run away somewhere so they can't find me and send me to that glandered-up eastern school with its high-withered, overdressed fillies and scowling old-maid teachers. Let's!"

It was desperation talking, and she would have been the last to pull a thing like that. But it helped just to talk about it and to confide in somebody. Doug drove her to the station in the buckboard, with John Troutman and many of the cowpunchers riding alongside.

Tana cried some when the train clanked into the depot. And when her father was superintending her baggage, she kissed Doug on the lips and ran for the car. It was a kiss that Doug was to treasure always, one that raised him high in the estimation of the cowboys.

The fact that Tana always asked about him in her letters seemed to make a profound impression upon John Troutman. Or maybe in his loneliness, he turned naturally to youth. Always he would call Doug in to read him excerpts from her letters and to show him other kindnesses. Now Doug was taking a tophand's place and finding life swift and good. Rip and Tex and the Mescalero affair seemed dim memories.

Tana came home the next summer with changed tastes, many trunks of fine duds and a distaste, if not actual scorn, for the discomforts of ranch life. Doug, holding down a herd of summer feeders on Chain Meadows, in the Mangas Mountains, saw little of her. But he knew Tana was spending most of her time with girl friends in Catamount City, enjoying a continuous round of dances and parties.

When she left for school in the fall, her engagement to Reno Godey was announced. Young Reno Godey was cashier of the

Catamount City Bank, had a red-wheeled buggy and a spanking team of Exmores, and slicked-down black hair and misplaced eyebrows on his long upper lip. It shook Doug's faith in girls and brought back the dread loneliness.



IT WAS a bad winter for Doug; there were times when he was tempted to quit the hospitable Rafter T. Troutman, also cursed with the burden of loneliness and malaria, was grumpy and demanding of Doug's time. Come Doug's birthday, in April, the cowman called him into the office.

"Doug," he said with some embarrassment, "I've never had reason to regret takin' you out of the willers that night and makin' you one of us. I like you, kid, and I've been more'n pleased at the way you've handled yoreself. But you ain't satisfied, are yuh?"

"I ain't gettin' nowhere," Doug mumbled. "I—"

"And I'm glad you feel thataway, son. If you didn't, you wouldn't be half the material to work on. I got an idea. See what you think of it. You're twenty-one today. I know where there's a section of fine grazin' land in the breaks of the Catamount, where she swings in against the foothills of the Mangas Range.

"I'll put up the money to pay your filin' fee. I'll take your note for fifty heifers and a young whiteface bull. I'll give you all the help one man can give another, even to lendin' you what money you need to live on until you start to turn off beef. The only obligation is that you stay till you've got title. Then, if you're not satisfied, I'll take over at a price that we agree upon. What do you say?"

That's how Doug came to be on his own spread, with house and barn, corrals, well and fences reared by the cowboys of the Rafter T. It seemed like a dream. But the

fifty fat critters bearing his D Slash E were no dream. And the lush flat stretching toward the river from the house was no dream either. Those were facts and the future seemed to promise sure success. And into these dreams, despite Reno Godey and Tana's changed ways, the girl's picture fitted like a cameo setting.

The dream came true, in part, when summer's heat folded Catamount range in its humid grip. Doug had heard that Tana had returned to the ranch, having finished her second year of school. He ached to go to her, only the shadow of her affection for the sneering Reno Godey holding him back. And then one day, just as evening banked in purple pools against the Mangus heights, she came to him.

He was stirring up the fire preparatory to getting supper when hoof echoes drew him to the door. She was just dismounting when her eyes caught him. "Doug!" It came quick and sharp, as if it hurt her. And there was deep trouble in her hazel eyes.

"Tana!"

"Doug!" she gasped again, and made a swift dash to him.

He caught her in his arms. Then her lips were on his, warm and vibrant, and his long loneliness was over. Just as she responded strongly to his caress, she was strong and quick to break the embrace.

"No, Doug!" she gasped. "You mustn't! That's wrong! I—I—"

About her was a fear, an urgency that puzzled him. She had changed. He had known her last as a high-strung, leggy kid, spoiled to death and selfish. She was a woman now, maturity in her face and in the curving fullness of her body.

"You came here for something, Tana," he said. "What's the matter?"

"I—I don't know, Doug." She was trembling. "I was over to Molly Shafter's to visit. As I left for home, Pete was just coming over the hill. As I dipped across the creek, I heard shooting. It frightened me.

I came here as fast as I could to get you."

"Where was the shooting?"

"At the Shafter place, I think."

Doug stepped past her and swung into her saddle. Pete Shafter, his wife, Molly, and their children were his nearest neighbors. Nesters, struggling to do what he was doing, but without the backing of a rich and powerful outfit like the Rafter T.

"Go in the house, Tana," he ordered. "If anything's happening to the Shafter I want to be in on it. And saddling takes time."

"Doug!" Her cry ran after him as he spurred the animal. "I've got to meet Reno at eight."

"To hell with Reno!" he fired back. The faint distant rattle of gunfire had touched his ear.

Chapter II

SMOKY MUSIC

DOUg heard no further sound of shooting as he sped across the rolling five miles to the Shafter's. Night was falling when Doug topped a rise a quarter mile from the Shafter house. Nothing seemed amiss. The cabin was dark, but poor folks made as much use of daylight as possible. Kerosene cost money and money was scarce. It eased Doug's fears, until he rode into the dooryard and saw the dead dog. If it had been Pete Shafter, it could not have stirred stronger regret in him.

"Miz Shafter!" Doug bawled. "Molly! What happened?"

The door opened and Molly Shafter came out. She was a shapeless, sleazy, overworked woman with a sad face. Now that face was tragic. She peered through the twilight.

"Doug!" she gasped, and came running, her two small kids hanging to her skirts. "Doug!" Her bony hands were on his arm. "You know my Pete ain't a bad man. You

know he wouldn't hurt a fly, don't yuh? You'll tell 'em, please, Doug, that he couldn't have did that killing. Please!"

"Killing?" Doug blinked. "What killing, Molly? Where's Pete? What happened?" He lit down, put an arm about her as she threatened to fall and led her to a seat on her porch. Her five-year-old boy leveled a finger, puffing out his cheeks importantly.

"I seen the sheriff fall out of his kak, Doug," the kid said. "Right over yonder. Then they took daddy away."

Doug drew a long breath. Molly was weeping. Presently he quieted her and the story came out. Pete owed the bank a thousand dollars on a call note, secured by a stock chattel and a paper on their newly won homestead. They had felt safe in making such a loan to tide them over the bumps, for Huffy Harlow—a cowman who had made money and friends in the banking business—had never called a note except in the case of some polecat who tried to beat him.

Huffy, she said, had fallen sick and gone to San Francisco for treatment. The bank was being run by Reno Godey. About the first thing he did was to call Pete's note. Pete went to see him and Godey laughed, amused that anyone should expect a renewal.

"Pete pulled a gun—you know, just sort of a bluff," Molly Shafter explained. "Godey shot him, not seriously, and raised a cry of 'bank robber'!"

Pete, getting home a few minutes after Tana's departure, hadn't even time to wash his painful shoulder wound before the posse came thundering up, Sheriff Tom Dowling at its head. While he and Pete were palavering as to whether Pete should submit peaceably and go to jail, or be blasted out, a shot rang out and Dowling tumbled from his saddle—dead.

"Pete never fired that shot, Doug," Molly declared. "I was right beside him and I orta know. He never fired ary shot at

all, even after him and me and the young 'uns was on the floor, with bullets flyin'. It's all a crooked scheme to get our place; that's what it is. I was willin' to fight it out beside my man, for what we slaved to get. But he wouldn't have it. He was thinkin' of us, Doug, me and the kids. I. . . ." Tears came again.

Doug was hard put to keep calm nerves. "Where'd that shot come from, Molly?"

"Musta come from behind the house, Doug. Mebby from the crick. There's some cover down there for a bushwhacker to hide behind."

"Got a lantern? Light it an' let's give a look."

With the wide-eyed kids tagging along, they went to the sandy creek bed, with its screen of willows. They found where a tied horse had nibbled willow bark. Some distance away, Doug found a spent .45-70 cartridge and a cigar butt wearing an El Principe de Gales band. That cigar band gave Doug a start.

Tex Jardine had smoked that brand. would ride ten miles out of his way to get one. But that was hundreds of miles from here and Tex was not in the Catamount and, besides, a lot of other men must smoke El Principe de Gales. With something like the embarrassment of a kid caught smoking corn silk, Doug tossed the banded butt away.

"Somebody," he said, "killed Tom Dowling from ambush. Somebody with a .45-70 rifle. With all the .45-70's around here, it's like looking for a needle in a haystack. But I'll go to Catamount and see what I can do for Pete."

"Bless you," Molly said. She stood by the door, watching him ride away. The last he saw of her, the children were clinging to her and the light of the upheld lantern accentuated the gauntness of her face. Range troubles were bad enough for a man, Doug thought. But, at least, a man could fight back. For the women, brave or otherwise, they were hell.

D OUG lost no time getting to his D Slash E. There was a light in the cabin and Tana awaited him. Her eyes were filled with curiosity. "Doug, what was that—that—"

"A posse," Doug said. "Shooting holes through Pete's house."

"Molly?" Tana went pale. "Those poor little kids?"

"Not scratched, Tana, thanks to lying flat behind sound logs. But Sheriff Dowling is dead and Pete is headed for the Catamount jail on a murder charge."

He was walking down to the corral to rope and saddle one of his own ponies. Tana matched his stride, staring at him as if doubting she had heard him right. She watched him loop the horse and throw a saddle on.

"What will you do?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "Whatever there is to do, I reckon."

"Anything dad can do? Or Reno? That's it, Doug! Reno's running the bank now; he should be able to help. Get Pete out on bail, or something."

Doug rose to the saddle and looked down at her. "Listen," he said, and she had never heard his voice so brittle. "Your precious Reno started this by crowding Pete to hell and gone. He's trying to take away the place. He knows Huffy Harlow would never do that. He knows Huffy will never stand for it, once it's done, unless. . . ." He paused, hit by a sudden, damning thought. "Unless Reno Godey knows that Huffy ain't going to get well."

"Doug!" Tana's cry was a protest. "Reno's not that kind. There's some mistake."

"A bad mistake," Doug agreed. "A mistake that can kill a lot of people on this range if he carries that sort of thing too far. Tell him I said so." He put spurs to his horse.

Behind him, the girl was screaming. "Doug, come back. Let's talk it over with dad. . . ."

Doug didn't look back; he didn't pause. He rode the spurs, with two great fears in his heart. Fear for Pete Shafter—a fine, friendly man and as good a neighbor as a hombre could ask. Fear that he had hurt Tana, hurt her beyond hope. . . .

Lured by the glow of light along Commercial Street and the lonely whistle of a switching engine in the yards, Doug came to Catamount City. The voice of the town, never muted at this hour, was loud tonight, and yet not loud in the raucous way of its usual nocturnal revelry. Catamount had something to talk about and men made the most of it.

Groups stood on the walks, in rectangles of light from saloon windows, hashing and rehashing the murder of Sheriff Tom Dowling. They lined the bars, discussing the pros and cons of the nester problem. In the dominant Imperial Saloon one to three odds were offered that Shafter would never come to trial.

Doug, dawdling over his whiskey glass, was frightened by the talk. It concerned shyster lawyers who made a business of talking criminals out of any just settlement of their crimes; of vigilante law and the economy of people taking justice into their own hands. They talked, too, of the successor to Tom Dowling—one Illo Miller, one-time marshal of the boom camp of Gilt Edge. That curled Doug's lips. He knew Miller as a drunkard, a boaster and confirmed politician.

Doug drained his glass, set it down and—and then felt his backbone freeze. A hand had fallen on his shoulder. A puff of cigar smoke was in his nostrils and a flat, half-amused voice was in his ear.

"I do believe you're my old friend, Doug Eyton. Hello, kid."

Doug turned slowly, a chill pouring along his nerves. He was reminded of that cigar butt in the creek bottom, behind Pete Shafter's house. Nor was he wrong. It was Tex Jardine, a little less gaunt and better dressed, but with the same taunting, cyni-

cal smile; the same cold, restless eyes, the same brand of cigar screwed into the corner of his wide, thin lips. A whip-end of temper lashed Doug.

"So," he said, tight-lipped. "That was you, in the brush back of Shafter's."

Jardine laughed, but none of it got into his eyes. "Just like always," he chuckled. "Gotta have your joke. What makes you think so?"

"A smoked-down cigar butt, with the band still on it."

"A puny hook to hang even a dirty pair of drawers on, kid, let alone a man that knows the answers. You don't act glad to see me, Doug."

"I am, though," Doug said. "I guess the most of my praying has been that some day I could find you and pay you off."

Jardine blinked under Doug's intense stare. He said hurriedly, "You interest me, kid. I thought the shoe was on the other foot. Come on in a back room and let's talk it over." Ordering bottle and glasses from the bartender, without paying, he led the way toward the rear.

Chapter III

SHADES OF DEAD MEN

WHEN they were seated and the drinks poured, Jardine grinned. "Pay me off, eh? Did I hear you right, kid. What could I possibly owe you that could halfway balance running off with the horses and leaving me at the mercy of that aroused town? Well?"

Doug spat. "You damn dog," he said slowly. "You sold us into hell. You shot Waspy when he might have made it free. I got one slug into you without killing you, worse luck."

"You amuse me, Doug, but that's all," Jardine said softly. "I want no quarrel with you. To hell with the past. For me and for you, the present is the thing. You've got a nice little spread coming along and

I have no desire to spoil it for you. But that's what will happen if you don't get the war out of your neck and play nice."

"You ain't my idea of a playmate, Jardine."

"Mebby not, kid. But men's ideas can change. I'm here to stay, Doug, and not for my health. I'm here on business, damned profitable business."

"You came here to murder Sheriff Dowling," Doug said. "You've done it. And the crime is pinned on Pete Shafter, my friend."

"You never were too smart choosing your friends, kid," Jardine said lightly. "Dowling was too honest for his own good. He stood in the way of the biggest thing this basin has ever seen. Shafter is a two-bit nester planted right in the path of progress. In a way, you're in the same boat. Get stubborn and you'll be moved out whether you like it or not. It will pay you big to string your bets with mine. I'll be needing help I can trust."

"Count me out," Doug snapped. "It's no bargain to be trusted by your kind."

Jardine's angular face darkened. "If I didn't think there was a chance of making you eat those words, kid, I'd accommodate you with guns, right now. But you're more valuable to me alive than dead. You're going to throw in with me if for no other reason than to keep Mescalero deputies out of the Catamount."

"So that's your pressure?" Doug glared. "Well, call them in. Call them in and I'll promise you won't be in shape to testify against me. As to your important business; you've framed Pete but you ain't got his place yet. If you want mine, come and pay the price for it."

Jardine laughed again. "I realize how you're hooked up, kid. If things go bad on your claim, you can fall back on Troutman. But don't lean too heavy on that. Troutman's marked for slaughter, kid, with a red line under his name. You can go down with him or you can be smart

and become one of the big cattlemen of this section. How are—"

He paused. A throaty roar was coming from the barroom. The building shook with the sudden tramp of heavy boots. Outside, an answering yell beat high and wild. Doug stood up. "What in hell is that?"

"They're taking the sheriff's killer out of jail," Jardine smiled. "Should be a good show, kid. See you there." He turned his back and left the room. Behind him, Doug stood frozen.

The waning of the clamor as the mob drew down toward the jailhouse snapped Doug out of his inertia. The barroom was empty as he ran through. The bartender was just outside the door; Doug knocked him down as he barged through the doors. Spinning to gain his balance and ignoring the man's cursing, Doug ran to his horse, hit the saddle and came in toward the jail by way of back lots. Posted behind the walk and between two buildings, Doug watched the ugly picture unfold.

The crowd—and it seemed everybody in Catamount must be there—was banked about the jail entrance, brandishing guns, roaring for a victim. Even as Doug watched, Tex Jardine came elbowing his way along the front of the jail and up to the elevated stoop. Following at his heels and taking none of the buffeting, was the bank cashier, Reno Godey.

When they were planted in front of the jail door, their hands upraised and Jardine's bawled: "Silence! Silence!" had brought a half hush, the banker began to speak.

"Hear me, men," he roared. "Are you civilized people or are you bloody savages? Maybe Shafter killed Dowling; it's for the law to judge him, not us. Go about your business and give the law a chance." He turned his head. "Sheriff! Sheriff Miller! Come out here and talk to the boys. You can tell it better than I can."

Within the jail the bolt was thrown and the door opened to reveal Acting Sheriff Miller, a cocked scattergun in his hands.

It was a rash act. And, more than likely, Doug thought, a crooked one. The crowd boiled over.

"Git out the way or we'll string you up with Shafter."

"No crooked shyster's gonna talk this murderer free."

"Hang the sheriff-killer!"

Miller braced himself, leveling the muzzle of his weapon. Tex Jardine struck it down.

The invitation Jardine uttered came clearly to Doug's ears: "No you don't, Miller. I ain't for no lynchin' but I'm damned if I'll see good men shot down to protect the scaly hide of any murderin' coyote."

It was a miserable travesty, a theatrical spectacle put on by the man who undoubtedly had slain Dowling. It was evidence extraordinary that he had done all a man could to prevent this sad overflow of mob hysteria. The sheriff, with no show of resistance as they swept him aside, was in on it. And so was Reno Godey—a man who thought himself good enough for Tana Troutman.

It sent a wave of rage racing along Doug's veins. He put his pony across the walk, whipping out his six-shooter. From where he had been hunkered down beside an emergency water barrel, at the corner of a building, a man straightened, leaped and caught Doug's bridle. Doug's weapon came down, and only the sight of the man's profile held his trigger finger. Doug stared at him in astonishment.

"Parson," he said, "if you knew how close you came to getting shot, you'd swear never to do a fool trick like that again."

"My life," the minister said, "is as nothing to the hope of halting the Devil's march through Catamount. A gunshot will stampe the blood-mad mob into God only knows what wicked violence. Put up your pistol and give me a decent chance to talk to them."

HIS GLANCE swiveled to the jailhouse, where men were now emerging with Pete Shafter in their midst. Down the street they turned, the crowd pressing in about them.

"What will weak-tea preachin' do to that?" Doug said bitterly. "About as much as a powderless cartridge."

But the preaching man hadn't heard. Having loosed the reins, he was angling out to meet the advancing throng—a loose coupled, fiercely sincere man, filled with the zeal of his faith.

The echo of their marching mob was startlingly loud now in the awed hush. Blood lust had given way to the grim acknowledgement of mystery, when men stand in the presence of death. And now, in the path of this ominous advance toward the town's hangtree, the zealot's voice struck thinly.

"In God's name, give up this wicked thing! Thou shalt not kill! Surely some of you won't wilfully sell your soul to the Devil for the doubtful joy of shedding blood. If so, step out beside me. Take a stand against this blot on Catamount City."

Not one voice answered him. They just marched on, brushing him aside as a flood might sweep away a chip. With unbroken, measured stride, they engulfed him, carried him along with them.

Doug whirled his horse, put him back between buildings, following the rear alley to the river bank, where the tall cottonwoods grew. On the way he picked up a pony tethered to a rear hitchrack. The two animals he tied in the willows below the cut-bank. As he climbed up again, he jerked his bandanna up to his eyes.

Poised behind leafy cover, Doug watched the mob come on, its swinging legs shadowed strangely by the dozen or more lanterns. He gripped his gun, commanding his mind to present an answer to his problem. How could he hope to get Pete away.

The leaders of the hang-mob reached the tall tree with the low, horizontal limb.

The ranks opened and Shafter was shoved to the center of a ring of lanterns. Somebody threw a noose over his head and drew it tight. Pete's lips were moving, but not in prayer. He was cursing them softly and deliberately. The tall, cadaverous minister was beside him, pleading with the leaders not to go on. A man led a horse into the center and they boosted Pete up onto its back. A man was reaching for Pete's hands, to tie them, when a high yell slashed along the street, and the drumming of hoof beats sounded. There was a swift scattering of the mobsmen.

"It's Troutman and his Rafter T riders!" a man bawled. *"Cloudin' for a storm, boys!"*

Doug's heart leaped as he saw the six cowboys come racing to the tree, the stocky Troutman in the lead. As Doug hurtled from cover, Shafter struck down the hands of the man trying to fetter him. He cast off the noose and then, suddenly, had a long-barreled pistol in his hand and was laying it about him as he kicked the pony in the flank. Doug's ideas of preachers underwent a sudden change, for he was ready to swear that the gun came from the hand of the cadaverous sky pilot.

Pete's horse was knocking men aside as he fought his way toward the Rafter T. At the edge of the crowd a mobsman whipped out his gun and drew a bead on Pete's back—and Doug shot him! It drew attention to himself and lead began driving at him. Suddenly it was too hot; Doug took a last look along the street, then hurtled over the cutbank.

Pete had joined the Rafter T boys and they were outriding him, spurring hard, firing back over the heads of the frustrated townsmen.

Doug lit heavily, got up and tore for his horse. Bullets whistled around him, slashing through the willows, as men came to the cutbank and blindly raked the underbrush. Untouched, he hit the saddle and turned his frightened pony across the creek.

He twisted in the saddle as he hit the other bank, yelling at the top of his lungs. It was a wild, wordless expression of anger and defiance.

Doug rode fast until he caught the trail leading to the Rafter T. There he reined down, cocking his ears along the back-trail for sounds of pursuit. There were none. He halfway expected to be overtaken by Troutman, Pete and the others; was hoping fervently he would be. But he had seen or heard nothing of them when he reached a point opposite the notch in the hills—the pass he used to reach his own D Slash E.

Lazing his horse up the slant into the notch, filled with speculation on the import of Tex Jardine's warnings and jealousy of Reno Godey—who seemed to have turned against the valley that had made him—Doug took little note of the night until he saw the bright glow ahead. And, even as that fact was borne home to him, he realized that the glow represented the fall of the concrete beginnings to which he had pinned his future hopes. Gritting a curse, he swung through the gap at a lope.

"Burned out!" Doug gritted the words as he caught the down-slope and roared toward the creek and his own claim. "Tex didn't wait to show me he meant what he said. He just burned me out."

Below him, the house was wrapped in flames too far along to promise even the faintest hope of putting them out. The barn, more than half full of cured meadow hay, was now an inferno. The roof of an outbuilding caved in, sending a shower of sparks skyward. Fire even raged at the box and winch of the well. The fire-bug had made a thorough job of it.

Doug accepted failure with grimly flashing eyes. In the glare of the fire, he scouted for sign. Tracks! Tracks of shod horses and tracks of his own colts, taken from the corral.

"God help the polecat I ketch with one of them fuzzies," he stewed.

A faint thunder of hoofbeats caused him to swing into the saddle and spur out of the range of the firelight. He needn't have bothered. It was Troutman and his riders. Pete had parted from them, to go to his family. Old John came slanting in with his gun in his hand and war in his neck. He was profanely furious.

"Damn the hounds that done this!" he hollered when he recognized Doug. "I'd plenty like to notch my sights onto the long-eared, hip-sweened son with the torch. Flush anybody, kid?"

"In Catamount City, yes," Doug said.

"Who?" It came in a roar from the Rafter T men. "Name him, Doug, and we'll curry some of the wolf out of him."

"Why should you have any enemies, Doug?" Troutman said then.

"It goes back a long ways," Doug said. "A gent I knew pretty well, and nothin' good about him. A bad hombre but, in my book, not half so bad as the smooth gent that hired him to come here."

"Anybody I know, Doug?"

"Yes." Doug hesitated a moment. Then: "The same gent that started the trouble by callin' in loans Huffy Harlow had faithfully promised would be renewed. The same gent that ordered Sheriff Dowling shot so he could get somebody into office that would jump through the hoop when he cracks the whip. You already know I'm talkin' about Reno Godey."

The Rafter T men took that in reserved silence, knowing how close Godey was to the Troutman household. Finally, John Troutman said, "That's a pretty serious herd of charges, son. Can you prove 'em?"

"I won't have to," Doug said. "I was

propositioned to throw my gun into a deal that has you what they call 'marked for slaughter.' A deal they call the biggest thing ever to hit the Catamount. This—" he swung his arm toward the white-hot bed of coals "—this is my payoff for refusin'. As I get it, they won't be long in strikin' again."

"I know how we can lay 'em out in the open," a Rafter cowboy said.

"Shut up that kind of talk!" Troutman glared. "We're all tired. Let's sleep on this and mebbly it won't look so blue in the morning. Tip, you and Lofty ride over and stay with Pete's layout tonight, just in case. Doug, I promised I was behind you to the last white chip. Come on to the ranch with me. Tomorrow we'll talk over what's best to do."

Doug's rage gave way to fear. "Just happened to think," he gasped. "Tana came here to warn me of the shootin' at Pete's. You reckon she was here when—"

"What you think drewed us to Catamount?" Troutman demanded, rising to the saddle. "She come with word of Pete's arrest and you going into town to rescue him—alone. I grabbed everybody in the bunkhouse and raised a dust. And not a second too soon, from the look of it. We can't do nothin' here; let's go home."

Chapter IV

HELL'S WAR CALL

THERE was nothing that seemed to call for a quick decision next morning, yet everybody was up before dawn. Old John, stiff and suffering with

A rousing, memorable novelette of the fur frontier, written by the author of this great novel, Harry F. Olmsted, appears in the January issue of our brother magazine, 10 STORY WESTERN. Don't miss "Pelts and Blood for Wilderness Kings," a stirring epic of smashing adventure in a rough, untamed land where gunsmoke ruled the traplines. **Now on sale.**

the morning miseries, greeted them all with a surly grunt, drank his coffee, lit a cigarette and clanked out of the chuck house. They watched him go, as if trying to read the key to his thoughts and so stifle the tension within them. Nobody spoke because nobody knew what to say.

Doug put away a good breakfast and went out into the dawnlight to light his smoke. That was when the two punchers left at Pete Shafter's place came galloping in with word of repulsing a gang of riders, bent on mischief in the early morning hours. There had been shooting. One of the raiders was dead.

"It's that buck-toothed little gunslinger," Lofty said, "that signed on with Huffy Harlow's Circle H. Casino, I think they called him. Why you reckon the Circle H would be devilin' Shafter?"

Troutman shook his head. He was still shaking his head when the lone rider on the beautifully gaited sorrel came swinging down the tree-lined lane from the road. Old John noted the grim twisting of Doug's face.

"Know him, son?" he asked.

"I don't know any good of him," Doug said slowly. "Right there, though I can't prove it, is the gent that killed Tom Dowling."

John Troutman grunted and his face was unreadable as Tex Jardine rode up smiling, made a graceful dismount and dropped the split reins. "Mornin', Doug. Mornin', gents." He made a picture of quiet good humor, marred only by the gun at his hip and a certain chill far back in his smiling eyes. "I'm looking for John Troutman."

"I'm John Troutman," the boss said gruffly. "What can I do for you, stranger?"

Jardine's hand came out. "I'm William Jardine. Call me Tex. I'm the new owner of the high range along your west line. Thought it might be fitting and neighborly to meet up with you and get on a

friendly basis for driftin' each other's cattle across the line."

Old John looked him in the eye as he shook hands. It was a test, and Jardine passed it. Old John said, "Glad to meet you, Jardine. Come up onto the porch and set while we talk." Then, when Doug and the others would have turned away, Troutman added, "Doug, you come set with us." Whereupon Jardine favored Doug with a wild, bold, flashing smile.

When they were seated, Old John said, "I'm suprised that Huffy would sell you his summer range. The old man must be pretty hard up."

"I bought it from Godey," Jardine corrected. "He bought the Circle H and is keeping the home ranch. While we're not exactly pardners, we'll work together mighty close. I hope you and I can work out an agreement half way as good, providin', of course, I can't persuade you to sell."

"Me sell?" John Troutman laughed.

"Blacktail Meadows, on my new holding," went on Jardine, unflustered, "will make a fine summer headquarters, but might be a little slushy come snowfall. That's where I'll build if I can't buy you out. What's your price, Mister Troutman?"

"The Rafter T ain't for sale."

"Should be a price for everything in the world, includin' your ranch. Name it. Cash on the barrel-head, Troutman."

"For the second time, Jardine, she ain't for sale."

Tex smiled as they refused his cigars. "Eyton and me was good friends in the prairie country, Troutman. Doug, can't you rate influence to swing this sale?"

"Not him or a hundred like him," Old John said hotly. "Yonder—" he leveled his arm "—my Sally's sleepin'. Reckon I'd sell that, Jardine?"

It brought a coldness to Jardine. "That ain't final, Troutman. See you soon with some augerments to change yore mind."

As Jardine stepped off the porch and swung away, Troutman said, "Just how you reckon he meant that, Doug?"

"Let's find out," Doug said, and caught Jardine as he rose to the saddle. They were eye to eye, alone, their feelings bare. "If them stronger augerments harm John Troutman, Tex, I'll take quite a little killin'."

Jardine sneered. "There's a idea, feller. Well worth toyin' with."

"You raise the debt for payment, Jardine. First the sell-out at Mescalero. Next a torch at the D Slash E. Next time, one of us goes down."

There was murder in Jardine's eyes. "You took the words away," he snapped. "Pay-off works both ways. You gunned me at Mescalero. You got that gun to Pete Shafter, I'm satisfied. Mebby you killed my amigo at the Casino last night."

"Good riddance," Doug said. "Any more jokes, Jardine?"

"Six," the man said coldly. "One day you'll die laughin' at 'em."

He spun his horse and loped away without a backward look. Gritting back his hate of the man, Doug hit the porch as Old John came out of the house. He looked older. "Just rang Godey at the bank, Doug," Troutman said slowly. "Jardine's right. Huffy's sold the Circle H, after promisin' faithful to give me first whack, if ever."

"Even a well man," Doug said significantly, "might not buck Catamount guns."

"I hope Godey ain't in this," Old John said, "for Tana's sake."

"The more you doubt that," Doug said, "the sooner they'll gobble you. They got you marked for slaughter. Don't forget that."

Troutman's interest quickened. "You knew Jardine before, eh? What is he?"

"A forked gent dreamin' prison bars and hang nooses. Crooked as a snake with its back broke. He'd murder his grandmother for her gold teeth."

"Don't like him, do yuh? But, bein' specific, what?"

"He's got a fast gun, a cold heart and rowelin' ambition. He's admitted he's pullin' off the biggest deal the basin's seen. He's teamed up with Reno Godey. He's out to kill you an' me too, now that I've wised you. John, there's no two ways about it—we gotta rub him out."

Old John's hand went to Doug's shoulder. "Easy, son. Don't tackle something that can only embarrass us all. We gotta be law-abidin', givin' 'em first bite even if it kills us. Like lettin' 'em burn you out, though I can't see what that bought 'em. Throw yore warbag in here, son. We'll fight 'er through together."

Doug accepted, as bewildered perhaps as was Troutman. But, different from the cowman, he was certain the Catamount was caught in a whirlwind of disaster that must finally sweep one faction or the other down. He worried for Old John. He feared for Tana. What future was in store for her, tied to a man conspiring against her sire?

A breath of that whirlwind blew across the Rafter T about sundown. Sheriff Miller, heading a grim-faced posse, came riding in with a pack horse burdened with a tightly tarpaulined pack.

"It's Tap McDono," he explained to Troutman. "I was tipped off his corraled colts was sufferin' for water. Rode out and found Tap dead. Plenty ripe. Can't tell if he was shot in his bunk, or got it somewhere's else and crawled in to die."

"Too bad," muttered Old John, who had sold cattle to this lonely nester at the edge of lava. "He got any heirs?"

"What if he has? They won't collect nothin' after the bank's paid off."

Old John wondered. Last time he had seen Tap, he had been paid cash and told of nester luck—two thousand in the bank and a nice herd growing. Yes, Troutman had some doubts. Few knew McDono well. None would have called him a liar. Here was the bank involved again.

SINCE returning to the Rafter T, Doug had seen Tana only at a distance, and then briefly. Twice she had waved to him, but their chance to talk didn't come until Old John asked Doug to hitch up the buckboard and drive the girl to the train. At Doug's quick question, Troutman explained that she was going to Pleasanton, seventy miles to the east, to visit a girl friend.

When the bags were placed, the matched roans put swiftly to the road and the twilight was settling pleasantly around them, Doug turned his eyes to the girl at his side.

"For a lady about to visit friends," he said, "you act particularly unhappy."

"It's not my idea," she said miserably. "Dad insisted. I'm worried about him, Doug. Worried about the valley and everybody in it. He will tell me nothing." She looked up gravely. "You could tell me plenty . . . if you would."

"I'd tell you all I know, Tana, if I thought it would stop your worries. But it would only add to them."

"That bad, is it?"

"No. But it's that mixed up and without reason. Like your father said, we gotta lay back an' wait for 'em to strike at us. Even if the first stroke beats us."

"That's like dad." She brooded a little. "But who should strike—and why? We've had peace and friendliness in the Catamount. It's been like one big family. Even the cowmen and the homesteaders have ironed out their troubles. Dad intimated that Reno might be mixed up in it somewhere. How, Doug?"

"I don't know, Tana. And that's the honest truth."

They didn't talk much after that. The shadow that had begun to fall over the valley also affected their spirits. Catamount City was particularly tame this night as they speeded through. At the station, Doug carried the bags to the wind-swept platform, stood there beside her, staring west-

ward for the tell-tale flashing that would herald the coming of the train.

"I know dad wants to get me out of danger," Tana said. "It frightens me, Doug." She gripped his arms fiercely. "Promise me you'll look after him. Don't let him take fool risks. And you, Doug, don't . . ." Her voice grew husky, then ceased.

The girl's hands fell away and there was a dejected droop to her shoulders.

She looked so frail she stirred something in him. He shut his eyes to the faint trembling of her lips, his control close to breaking. Then, as control did abandon him, he turned her and pulled her into his arms.

Doug had kissed her once before, but it was not a kiss like this. He knew now only the hope to stir in her the emotion which woke this madness in him. As upon that other occasion, she resisted his caress, then gave in to it. Once before she had scolded him, but not this time. He let her go only when the headlight of the engine threw a glaring white halo about them.

She stepped back, plainly shaken. "Doug," she gasped, "you . . . you have never told me . . ."

"I'm telling you now, Tana."

"I—I know." There was confusion and helplessness in her eyes. "I think I know."

"You asked about your dad," Doug went on. "I'll look after him like he was my own. I would without you asking it. But as for me, why should I care? You're going to marry Godey." He turned away but she caught his sleeve.

"Doug . . . goodbye." She kissed him, recklessly indifferent to the townsfolk coming down to meet the train. Then she turned away, picked up her bags and stepped out to take the train. Something like a haze settled over Doug's mind. Like a drunken man, he went to his waiting team.

SHERIFF ILLO MILLER, sucking on a good cigar and idly watching the train pull out, saw Doug Eyton tool the Rafter T buckboard along the street, looking like a man with a lot on his mind. He saw him reach the edge of town, cramp and turn the rig just this side of the bridge and come trotting back. Wondering, the lawman watched Doug drive to the telegraph office, tie the team and go inside.

"Now, who you reckon he's wirin'," he muttered, and turned to enter the Imperial Saloon. "Jardine shore orta be interested."

A townsman stopped him. "Just seen an interesting sight, Sheriff," this gentleman babbled. "A juicy morsel for somebody to chew over. Just seen Doug Eyton kissin' the Troutman gal. In the open too, with the train headlight on 'em and everybody lookin'. That orta stir up a good shootin', eh? You think so?"

"Go scratch," the lawman muttered. "You're lousy."

Yet it was, as the man had stated, a juicy morsel in the hands of one anxious to curry favor with a coming big-wig. The sheriff affected a very solemn and concerned air as he approached the poker table where Tex Jardine played. His quick nod brought Tex to his side.

"Sorry to interrupt your game," he said seriously, "but I thought you orta know. Eyton just fetched the Troutman gal down to take the train. He was kissin' her somethin' scand'lous, right in the engine light, with everybody lookin' on. That won't be good news for Reno, I figger. Eyton's down at the telegraph office right now. Who you reckon he's wirin'?"

Jardine said, "Wait," and cashed in his chips.

Together they quit the saloon, pausing on the walk just as Doug put the roans along the street at a rapid clip. Two young, undersized toughs, summoned from the bar by a nod, joined Jardine.

Jardine said, "Yonder goes a feller with a fatal disease—gun fever. And such a

pity, 'cause he's so young. When you two watch him die, don't shed no tears. This is a hard country an' you gotta be brave. Be a piece of change for you here in the mornin'. You savvy?"

"You talk riddles, Tex," one said. "But me and Fanner love riddles, don't we, Fanner?"

"You said it, kid. What we waitin' for?"

They clumped away on their high heels, heading for horses. Sheriff Miller was chuckling. "Heh, heh, you're a card, Tex. You sure take the cake."

"Shut up," Jardine barked. "Let's get over to that telegraph office."

A beardless youngster held down the key and they waited until he had taken down an incoming message. Then: "Who'd Eyton telegraph to?" Jardine asked.

The operator trotted out the stock answer. "Company records are secret and inviolable, subject only to subpoena. I'm very—"

Sheriff Miller laid his six-shooter on the counter.

The youth gulped and turned pale. "To a Mister Harlow; the Western Pacific Hospital in San Francisco."

"Let me read it," Jardine snapped his fingers and the sheet was handed to him promptly. The sheriff read it over his shoulder, chuckling as he finished.

"Imagine that," he guffawed. "Telegraphin' Huffy Harlow to find out if he authorized foreclosure on the Shafter place. Also, if the deal on the Circle H has gone too far for Troutman to make a bid. The answer is yes, ain't it?"

Jardine reflected none of his humor. "What kind of an answer came back on this, boy?"

The operator handed him another sheet. It said: *No delivery. Harlow deceased.* Jardine smiled thinly, handed the boy a dollar and led the way outside.

"Eyton don't know it," he muttered, when they got out into the night, "but comin' back to send that wire got him two

answers—both deceased. A dangerous young feller. Pious idea to have him out of the way. Let's go get a drink."



THOUGH he had not known Huffy Harlow more than just casually, the verification of the old banker's death hit Doug hard. This man, one of the valley's pioneers, had wrested a modest fortune from the cattle ranges of the Mangas Mountains and had, in answer to the popular appeal, put his money to work for Catamount Basin.

He had started the Catamount State Bank largely to help his neighbors. In a day when banking ethics were lean and decidedly open to suspicion, his rugged honesty stood out like a beacon. He never forgot the days of his beginnings, and the memory guided him in the making of loans. Few took advantage of him, and those who did failed to sour him. His death was the valley's loss, and the legend of him would be long in dying.

Tooling the buckboard back toward the Rafter T, Doug found himself dreading the arrival at the ranch. It would not be easy to break the news to Huffy's friends, among whom John Troutman was outstanding. Those who had Huffy's call loans would now be fully at the mercy of Reno Godey. Doug doubted there was any mercy in the man, and then wondered if that judgment could be tempered by his own jealousy.

So full was Doug's sympathy for those caught in the web of this catastrophe, he thought little of his business of the moment. His hands rested in his lap, the ribbons held loosely. The team took its own pace, a leisurely trot, speeding a bit as they caught the down-grade into the bottomland of Mustang Creek. Here the road was made gloomy by spreading oaks that rustled in the night breeze. Half way down the hundred yard slant, a break in the

oaks allowed a broad band of moonlight to splash across the roadway. Doug got the works here.

Like a lightning stroke out of a clear sky, a sharp voice rapped a brief order from dead ahead: "*Now! Burn him down!*"

From either side of the road, where it flattened into the bottom, came crimson muzzle bursts. A blow, as from a giant fist, smashed him in the left side, seeming to numb his whole body. Furious waves of explosive sound engulfed him, and through it came the scream of one of the rearing roans, mortally wounded.

By sheer instinct, Doug drove his hand to his gun, but even as he drew, the stricken off-animal hurtled over the brink of the cut in its death throes, dragging its teammate with it. Like something executed in slow motion, the buckboard toppled and also went over. Doug tried to flag his shocked muscles and failed. There was nothing he could do, and he was falling . . . falling. . . .

He could not have been out more than a few seconds. When he came out of it, he was caught in a bearberry thicket, upright and half standing and half sitting. His side throbbed dully and he still had little or no command of his faculties. But his gun was in his hand and there was nothing wrong with his hearing.

Near him, the one live horse struggled vainly to extricate itself from its twisted harness and the wreckage of the buckboard. Farther away sounded the soft beat of hoofs in the roadway and the low voices of men. Now, against the sky, he saw the forms of the two riders, peering over the brink.

"I tell yuh there was no chance of my hittin' that horse," one of the men said. "I had a dead bead on Eyton and I got him center. It was your shot hit the horse, which is mebbysso just as good a break as any. You go kill that other horse and I'll get Eyton's ears. Jardine says he's got a special reason for wantin' 'em."

The will to survive and settle with Tex Jardine alone restored to Doug the power to act. These two bloodthirsty gun hirelings had dismounted and were on the verge of starting down. They made very fine targets.

"Careful now," one warned. "That hombre may not be dead."

"If he ain't," the other laughed, "he's shore a lead-eatin' fool. When that saddle gun of mine dusts 'em, it's front and back and plumb through. Dead? I'll say he's dead. Knock off that horse, Joe, and they won't know what went with Eyton till the buzzards gather. Cripes, it's dark in these damn bushes."

Doug's gun was lifting. In him the traditions of a code burned strongly. A man must be given a chance for his life. But these two were not men. They were human weasels, murdering without warning, for the gold of the highest bidder. There was no mercy in him as he notched the sights on the leader. The hammer fell. In a gush of flame and sound, the bullet sped true to its mark.

"*God!*" The hillside gave back the echo of the man's dying shriek. One instant he was alive, advancing, a heartless menace with death in his hand. The next he had been struck down, moaning and jerking.

His partner, half a rod away, screamed: "I told yuh!" and swung his gun and let go. Bullets snarled about Doug. A bullet clipped his right thigh. Another tugged at his left arm. With painful slowness, conscious of his impotence, Doug swung his gun to the vague figure. This time he didn't take time to still the trembling of his hand. He missed. Two more bullets came smashing at him. One clipped a branch close to his right side. The other spun him around as it smashed his hip.

For another moment of hell, Doug thought the pain would sap the last of his powers. The gun-empty killer, succumbing to sudden panic, whirled and clawed his way toward the road, screaming meaning-

less curses as the two frightened horses wheeled and stampeded.

Thought of his getting away roused Doug. His gun lifted, held fair upon that climbing figure. Doug took plenty of time now, putting no pressure on the trigger until the man hit the edge of the road. Then he fired. The killer made no outcry. He just fell down on the ground.

The echoes ceased; there was no sound save the threshing of the trapped horse. Doug rallied, disengaged himself from the brush. He found the live roan on its side, held down only by the harness of the dead animal. A few slashes of Doug's knife fixed that. The animal scrambled to its feet, Doug clinging to a slashed rein. He let the beast drag him to the road, and there tried to draw himself astride its back. He almost made it, but failed as his strength gave way. As he fell, the horse became terrified at the blood smell about him, wrenched the reins from Doug's grasp and raced away.

Doug fell heavily, his senses spinning. He tried hard to rise, but the power was not equal to the will. He was losing blood. Lights danced before his eyes. He sighed weakly and stretched out in the middle of the road.

It was near dawn when John Troutman and the Rafter T cowboys, drawn by the blood-smeared and frightened roan with the cut harness, found him. . . .

Chapter V

"I'M CALLING YOU!"

FLAT on his back, enjoying good medical care, Doug healed rapidly.

He had no broken bones and there were no complications. After a week he was up, crippling around. Lack of strength bothered him most and the medico predicted a gradual lessening of that trouble as his body built back its spent blood supply.

Those were trying days for Doug, with clouds darkening over Catamount Basin and terror striking like a ghost in the night. The valley nesters, held together in only the flimsiest sort of a loose-knit organization, were worried to distraction. Word of their troubles filtered to the Rafter T, serving to make Old John Troutman more morose and wary of his own borders.

Hard hit by the death of Huffy Harlow, the cowman had lost himself in a savage readying process, preparing himself for the attack he knew must sooner or later come. Doug heard him leave before dawn each day and heard him return after dark. He saw almost nothing of him for the three weeks following his ambush.

It was about then that the nesters, having met at Gil Chaffee's place, rode to the Rafter T in a body, to talk over their problems with a big cowman whom they knew and liked and trusted. It was late and Old John had gone to bed. But he dressed, broke out a jug of whiskey and listened. Doug got up and joined the *wau-wau*.

There were seven small cowmen represented and five separate problems. Gil Chaffee's stacks had been fired, leaving him without winter feed. Also, his pasture fence had been cut and his horses run across the county line. Rawboned Curly Whitman and his son, Matt, bemoaned the loss of fifty white-faced breeders, purchased from ill-fated Tap McDono less than a year before. They admitted they hadn't vented the brands or re-ironed any of the critters.

"No secret what the play is there," Doug said. "The bank's taking over Tap's outfit for money nobody ever heard of him own'. Which makes it safe for Godey to herd up every beef he can find with Tap's brand on it, vented or otherwise. Why, all he's got to do to clean this range is to vent your brands and slap on Tap's iron. If it backfires anywhere, he can lay it to Tap. Pretty soft."

It caused a ripple of surprised talk to

run the circle and drew an energetic protest from Old John. "Wisht you hadn't said that, son. Even if true, you've gotta possess facts before you tab a man a rustler in this country. Either have facts or take the consequences."

"Either or both," Doug said grimly. "I'm about to set to start lookin' for them colts of mine."

"Whoever's doin' this," growled big Hutch Strickland, Rafter T cowboss, "is sure to bust into the open sooner or later. Get on with the business, boys. We gotta be up early tomorrow."

Pete Shafter, hollow-eyed and far grimmer than Doug had ever seen him, reported bullets streaking through his shattered windows almost every night. Once there had been a swift rattle of hoofs and a lighted torch on his roof. He still had lots of fight, but he was worried sick about Molly and the kids. He accepted gratefully when Old John told him to bring his wife and young ones and fix them comfortable in the almost unused saddle shed, at the Rafter T.

"Thanks," he murmured. "It's gettin' to my woman's mind. We can't stand much more. I'm ready to tell Godey to take my outfit and go to hell. Any job will look good."

The Barden Brothers, Beefy and Mark, told of a poisoned spring and dead cattle. Old Tom Yarnell had been shot from ambush, fogging it all the way down Truchas Canyon and barely escaping with his life after somebody finally shot his horse from under him. He waved his injured arm, in its soiled sling.

"The varmints done piled the only chance they'll git," he gritted. "I'm prayin' they tackle me again, so's I kin show 'em shootin' as is shootin'."

To a man, they admitted they had been approached by Jardine, representing Godey, with an offer to buy. All had refused and knew the refusal had inspired the terrorism. All but Pete Shafter.

"I can't see why they bother to haze

me, thisaway," he puzzled. "He's got my place anyway. I can't raise the money to fight the court case, let alone pay interest on my loan."

"Court!" Doug scoffed. "What chance have we got in court, with Miller as sheriff, Judge Henning—a stuck-up old geezer who hates nesters—and Godey, the financial pillar of Catamount, all buckin' us. Only court we can turn to is that of Ol' Judge Colt."

"You said it, kid," Tom Yarnell applauded. "Fight 'em every inch of the way."

"If you boys want my help," Old John said, tight lipped, "you'll do this legal all the way. Get the evidence for me, show proof that Godey's behind this business and I'll spend every dollar and every beef I've got to put him in the pen. But—"

The telephone jangled and Troutman answered. He came back with a troubled face. "It's Tana," he said. "Strong-willed and self-centered. Comin' home right in the middle of this business. Reno Godey's fetchin' her out around noon. Well, I done what I could to keep her outa harm's way."

The meeting broke up, with another set for a week later. That was a night Doug slept little and poorly. Tana was coming back. How would she react to the growing certainty of Reno Godey's guilt?



JOHN TROUTMAN and the Rafter T boys were away next day when there was a sudden rattle of wheels and the young banker came rolling through the yard, his high-stepping Exmores full of run, the bright red wheels of his new buggy flashing in the sun.

Godey, slim and well-groomed, had that slack and indolent carriage that proclaims confidence to the world. Gracefully, he halted the team, wrapped the lines and handed the girl down. There was a studied gallantry in his actions that brought a

flushed smile to Tana's full cheeks, and a pang of bitterness to Doug, where he watched from the stable door. Comparisons were punishing, yet Doug in that moment could not but make them.

Regardless of his own plans, his dreams, he was nothing but a forty-dollar cow-puncher, smelling of horse and leather and without any of the polite gestures dictated by proper social procedure. Godey, on the other hand, was perfection in manner, deportment and dress. He was sitting in a mighty strong seat and, if somebody didn't bring him down, was in a way to be very rich. He could give Tana everything.

At the doorway, Godey laid his lips to Tana's hand, tipped his fifty-dollar Stetson and turned back to the buggy, his cavalry spurs singing. As he swung the team about and flashed toward the gate, Doug stepped out to intercept him. Godey reined down, his smile beaming.

"Doug Eyton! Tana was telling me about your fire. I'm sure sorry to hear it. If the bank can—"

"Listen, Godey!" Doug's voice was like a lash. "You never was sorry for anybody but yourself, and you'll be sorrier if you go on with the scaly game you're playing. No, don't lie. I know the angles, feller, and where you fit in. I promise you, Tana's going to know. If you marry the Rafter T, Mister Big-hearted, you've got me to push out of the way. You already know that's not so easy."

Godey's eyes grew wolfish and the mechanical smile faded. "I'm glad you've come out into the open, Mister Bank-robber," he muttered. "And, as for your information, let me say I'll wipe you or any other man from my path, if you stand in my way. I'm not one to bluff easily. Or scare either. I'm calling you, Eyton."

"What with, Godey?" Doug's face was livid.

The man wrapped the lines and stepped from the buggy. "With this," he said, and drove his balled knuckles at Doug's jaw.

He missed as Doug ducked. Doug caught him by the coat collar as he spun off balance and rushed him around the corner of the barn, where they were hidden from the house. There he loosed the struggling, irate banker with a shove that sent him spinning around.

"What was that you called me with, Godey?"

The banker plowed in and launched his right fist like a man heaving a rock. Doug's teeth flashed as he swayed aside, bent at the knees and lunged. He was far from being at full strength, yet his actions ran smoothly together into a motion too hard and fast for the taller, softer man to avoid. The blow crunched against his jaw, snapping his head back. He described a grotesque cartwheel and hit the earth with a solid crash.

Doug was picking him up almost as soon as he lit. He clapped on the man's hat, carried him to his buggy and started the pony. It would carry him home. Doug was breathing hard and trembling in every limb when Tana came running from the house. She searched his eyes for the inescapable truth.

"You—you hit him."

"Not too hard, Tana."

"I hope . . ." her voice was quick and fear haunted her hazel eyes. "I hope you haven't done anything to bring trouble to dad, the Rafter T and . . . and the Cata-mount."

She turned abruptly and Doug said, "Wait, Tana. I'm sorry. There was nothing else a man could—"

The stiffness of her back repelled him and he paused, letting her go. Out of her rebuff had come a ray of comfort. In the expression of her hope, she had admitted the danger that lay in the man to whom she was betrothed. She must then believe something of the evil in him. When she knew the whole truth, as she surely soon must, his chances of possessing her were slim. Damned slim.

Chapter VI

LONE WOLF

THE campaign to ruin John Troutman got under way and developed swiftly. Rustlers cut out fifty Rafter T critters, hazed them into the hills and finally into the trackless wastes of the badlands known as the Devil's Playground. Old John was fighting mad. He led his outfit on patrols, eighteen hours a day, trying to nail the authors of the growing thievery. But the country was big. Lines were unfenced. Neither ten men nor ten hundred could insure such extended borders.

Doug was riding with the rest now, standing the strain none too well at first but toughening gradually. Pete Shafter had moved his family into the saddle shop and he, too, was making a hand for Rafter T. Troutman's efforts to enlist the other small cowmen into one outraged front failed dismally. They were still harassed by all manner of misfortune, including terrorism. Old John shrugged off his disappointment.

"When they get a bellyful of goin' it lone hand, they'll come around," he told Doug.

One day the smaller of three Rafter T patrol parties was ambushed, up near the summit of the Mangas Ridge. All were wounded, one man seriously. Doug led a punitive party in a futile quest, remembering Troutman was marked for slaughter. Zeb Lukins, the badly wounded rider, was a grizzled veteran who at a little distance could easily have passed for Old John.

"They thought they was notching you," Doug told Troutman upon his return. "The day that happens, Godey wins a rich pot. You stick close and let me hunt their hideout."

"The hell with that!" the cowman scoffed. "Don't figger there's a real hideout. They likely run the stuff through the Playground, drivin' 'em mebbly to the mines in Gunnysack Mountains. Or mebb-

byso to the narrow gauge, west of the Vermejo."

"Me, I'll be lookin' a lot nearer home," Doug said.

"You take over that end of it," Old John said. "Strickland will keep the boys at their line-ridin'. You tell him I said you was to have your pick of the crew."

"I aim to go this hunt lone-wolf. Just me."

"Alone? Why?" Troutman's face was blank.

"I figger somebody in this outfit's workin' for the other side. Not knowin' who it is, I might just be unlucky enough to choose him. No, I'll tackle it alone."

"I've had the same idea." Troutman seemed shaken by the idea. "We ride the west line and they strike in the east. We head north and they raid in the south. It could be somebody drawin' my pay. All right, son, you do as you please. Don't take fool chances. When you learn something, ride in for help. We'll do the rest."

They were still talking it over when Hutch Strickland led his boys in from the west line. He had a report of three strange horsebackers intercepted on the ridge and tailed into the roughs near Blacktail Meadows, where Jardine's new headquarters was being built.

"Them jiggers spotted us, jabbed home the spurs and raised dust," the foreman said glumly. "Our lead was short an' we couldn't head 'em. So all we done was to scare 'em back to'rds Blacktail. It's the Circle H or this Jardine outfit doin' the rustlin', I'm satisfied."

Speculation ceased when Solo Barton came from Catamount with the mail and the tip of a friendly bartender. "Sheriff Miller's arrestin' Doug for holdin' up a bank somewheres," he announced. It got only a laugh from the boys; not so much as a smile from Doug and Old John. Jardine was playing his trump cards, Doug could see.

"They're strikin' at me," Troutman

growled, "and I'm damned if they arrest one of my best men on that weak pap. Go right ahead with yore plans, Doug. I'll fetch grub and blankets to Sweetwater Seep, in the lava. You can headquarter there and I'll tell Miller I fired you some time back."

It was the best thing Doug could do. He rode at moonrise, reaching the east margin of Devil's Playground at dawn. With something like awe, he watched night flee the badlands. Sheer basalt troughs. Tumbled ridges without pattern. Lonely areas of scoria, with "niggerheads" and man-like upthrusts. Washed by torrential rains and fanned by tireless winds, these wastes digested sign quickly. Not a thing moved in all this vast and silent bleakness.

At the Sweetwater Seep, Doug ate the food he had brought, gave his pony a drink and a snag of oats, and began a systematic cross-sectioning of the waste. Back and forth, inching always westward as he shuttled from north to south and back again. Back and forth across the Playground, avoiding skylines and questing for sign. Late afternoon, after vainly patterning the easterly one-third of the badlands, he returned to the Seep, where, true to his promise, Troutman had left blankets and supplies.

Doug didn't chance a fire, satisfying his hunger from cold cans and crawling into the blankets to recoup his weariness. The first pale streaks of dawn were filtering through the willows when he awoke—to hear his pony nickering. An answering whinny came from down the draw and Doug quit his bed so fast he dislodged a rock, which clattered loudly.

The growing sound of hoofbeats ceased abruptly.

A voice said: "Looks like company at the springs, boys."

"Layin' for us," a man said. "Let 'em lay. I'm not quarrelsome this mornin'. Time to look further."

THOSE early morning visitors, none of whom had come close enough for Doug to see their shadows through the gloom, wheeled their mounts and spurred away. Rustlers, Doug thought, and timid ones. Probably sent by their boss to investigate the arrival of pack animals at the spring, yesterday. And yet they had seemed surprised. One of those voices had stirred Doug's memory.

After a quick snack, Doug cached blankets and grub in the thickets and rode to a point affording a view of the badlands. This morning there was movement. Yonder a lone rider loped leisurely, heading west. Doug unlimbered his 'scope, glassed up one of John Troutman's cowboys—a shy, diffident fellow believed by his fellows to be just a mite dumb. Doug slapped his leg. Lefty Papp's pose was stripped suddenly away.

"Dumb, hell!" Doug gritted. "There's the leak."

He was still watching Papp through the glass when the man suddenly turned in the saddle, jerked his saddle gun and blasted several shots along his back-trail. At a spurred lope, he vanished over a rise. And now, behind him, came three riders. They too disappeared, tailing Papp.

Doug scratched his head. "Now what's all that add up to? Am I misjudgin' Lefty Papp or is Godey's renegades fightin' amongst themselves?"

Following that strange chase, Doug found only a few tracks on the inhospitable ground, tracks that led him nowhere. Nor did he see anything further of the riders. But luck has a way of changing, and Doug's did about mid-morning. Riding into a step-sided basalt notch, he found a trickle of moisture. Following this up-stream, he had a glimpse of the green of willows. Trees can hide enemies and Doug approached carefully. No challenge rang out. No gunshot. The gully remained narrow and the trickle increased. He rounded a bend and there, in a deposit of volcanic mud, he found

the tracks of numerous horses and cattle.

Excitedly, Doug pressed on to where the banks fell away and the earth-bed deepened. Grass appeared magically, even though close-cropped, and somewhere cattle bawled. It proved to be an unexpected oasis, that lava cup lost in the heart of the lava flow. There was sweet water. Grass and browse. Cattle grazing, though not in any great numbers. Cattle with fresh-scabbled brands and vents.

Warily, he rode up the drainage, ready to wheel and spur should he be discovered. But nothing happened. A half mile from the entrance he found the camp—and nobody in it. Here were blankets, food, branding irons of Catamount Valley ranchers and odds and ends of cowboy paraphernalia.

With the nervousness of one under the scrutiny of enemy eyes, Doug kept on up the slot. A mile past the camp the drainage narrowed again and here he found a slide of decomposed lava, down which stock had been recently driven. This, he decided, was the entrance. Having climbed to a high point to orient himself, he lit out for the Rafter T.

He had his choice of several barren hogbacks reaching up to the dark wall of the Mangas Mountain ridge. There, for long distances, he was silhouetted as he climbed. He didn't like it. Surely the renegades would have look-outs. Their horses would be fresh, if indeed they were in the badlands this day, and his was leg-weary and in need of food.

"They'd sure admire to ketch me snoopin' around their holdin' ground this-away," he mused, his eyes roving nervously behind him. "And my luck's been too damn good for a lone hand this far from home. Git along, pony."

His fears were well founded. The lava ridge he followed showed signs of beef animals having been driven along it. Intent upon his back-trail, he came within half a mile of somewhere close to a hundred head of cattle streaming down the adjacent

ridge before he spotted them. And then it was not the cattle which interested him. It was the ten or more riders, fanning out as they slashed across the depressed interval to cut him off. A gun echo shattered the quiet of the hills. A bullet screamed wildly off the lava. Doug didn't wait. He put the ridge between and called on his pony for all he had.

Chapter VII

FORBIDDEN LAND

THEY came popping up to the ridge he had quitted like a line of buzzards. He was swinging a wide and losing circle that would take him to the cover of a low hill from which another folded ridge tipped upward. Their guns came to shoulder, following his course. The range was four hundred yards, maybe five hundred. Not too far for good shots. Only one thing encouraged him. They did not dismount to fire.

Smoke blossomed from that line of carbines. Across the interval bullets came screaming. Some wailed overhead. Others kicked up dust beside his pony's hoofs, horneting away savagely.

"Sorry, horse," Doug muttered, and veered across a manzanita swale and shot into taller brush. Bullets were showering him and the horse, yet miraculously none hit them. He punished the animal severely, hurling it up the side hill where the first scrub stand of pine beckoned.

They were yelling behind him, following and spraying his trail with lead. His worry now was about being set afoot. The pony was lunging now, its free running done for this day. Yet it did nobly and the renegades made no perceptible gain. He shot over the top of the hill and into the standing pines.

The way to the main ridge was by beaten trail and earth surface. Nor was the slant as steep as on the adjoining ridge. The

renegades, realizing this, were cutting across now, and losing ground. Doug called for all the faltering pony had—and got it. Under slackening pace, the jaded beast gained the flat Mangas Ridge top. Doug reined across a short clearing, swerved left into a narrow corridor between tall pines and tore into thick slashing at the far end. Here the gallant little animal's legs gave way and it plunged to earth. Doug was flung into a thicket, unharmed save for scratches. The pony was dead when he went to it.

Standing there in that deep tangle, Doug had little time to indulge either his regret or his discomfiture. He heard a horse come breaking into the clearing, its rider bringing it to a stiff-legged halt. That rider was Tana Troutman.

Doug's every instinct was to shout a warning. Two things held him silent. The renegades were already pelting into the clearing. And it was unlikely they would harm the girl Reno Godey proposed to marry, unless. . . .

Ten men on lathered horses came bouncing to a halt under hard rein, staring at the girl. Burly, bearded Gringo Price, ramrod of the Circle H, moved up to face her.

"Ain't you the Troutman gal?" he demanded.

"Yes. I'm Tana Troutman." There was a certain respect in these men and Tana played on it, sitting proud and straight, facing them bravely.

"What in the name of little horny owls and big 'uns are you doin' way up here, ma'am?"

"Looking for lost cattle. Seen any?"

"We're lookin' for some ourselves," Price grunted. "Been chasin' one of the polecats that's stealin' Circle H critters and yores too. See him ride past here?"

"Yes."

"Who was it?"

"Doug Eyton. Mighty surprised to see him up to such business."

Price slapped his thigh. "Knowed that

was the feller! Reckon you was surprised! Yore dad will be, too. Which way'd he go?"

"That way." She pointed down one of the hogbacks that reached into the Playground, somewhere near Sweetwater Seep. "His horse looked about used up."

"He's cuttin' back on us, boys." Gringo was instantly excited, his great nostrils flaring. "Purty cute. Come on." He was spurring his mount into a hard run, lifting his hand and flinging his bull voice back. "Thank'ee, miss, until Reno thanks yuh more personal."

They were gone, and the echoes of hoofbeats were dying away. Tana sat staring after them and Doug was watching her, shaken by the same violence of feeling she never failed to stir in him.

Doug feasted his eyes on her, making no sound, and presently she reined her pony around and came straight to where he stood screened in the second growth. And he knew then, for sure, that she had seen him pass on his dying mount. "Doug!" she called, and he stepped out before her. For a wordless moment they looked at one another, and Doug noted that her poise was gone. Her shoulders drooped dejectedly; tears ran down her face and her lips trembled.

"Thanks, Tana," he said.

"Doug, there's trouble at the ranch—God knows how bad!"

"Trouble?" Doug went to her. "Tell me."

"Last night," she said, "I rode to Catamount for the mail. Got back after dark to find guns blasting at the buildings—a ring of guns. I tied my horse and crept as close as I dared. About all I could learn was that Lefty Papp was there, directing the gunfire against the man who has employed him all these years. I rode for the sheriff, but he wasn't there."

"Probably one of the riflemen," Doug said bitterly.

"Then I lit out to find you," she added. "Dad had said you were at Sweetwater Seep. I waited around there a while and

then rode up a hogback to the ridge. I heard shooting and saw you take cover! Your horse is—"

"Dead, Tana. Yours will have to carry double, looks like." He flung himself up behind her. "Let's go see what's what at the Rafter T. And quit worrying. That gunplay was just a stall while Price and his wide-loopers cleaned all the Rafter T's off the ridge. Everything will be all right."

It was an optimism he was far from feeling. The enemy was strong and ruthless. The dark clouds of disaster were hanging low over the Catamount. His gloomy thoughts kept him silent and Tana seemed unwilling to talk about the fears that deviled her.



DARKNESS caught them five miles short of their goal. Through the gloom of pine shade, on the dropping slope of Mangas Mountain's northeast shoulder, they pressed across those miles, letting the overburdened pony take its own pace. And when that pace grew painfully slow, Doug got off and walked. He was walking at Tana's stirrup when the moon came up and she laid her hand on his shoulder. The level rays of the moon showed her eyes calm and brave again.

"Doug, I've been regretting something, terribly," she said softly. "I mean the way I spoke down there, the day Reno brought me home. I wasn't hating you for hitting him. It was only that everything seemed so awfully hateful and filled with violence, and that you shouldn't have added to it, just to air your dislike. But since then I've learned things, particularly what you're trying to do to get at the bottom of the trouble. I-I shouldn't add to your burdens. I'm sorry."

"Are you pitying me, Tana?"

"Doug." She halted the horse, looking at him with an unmasked gentleness and a definite searching of his mind. "Don't you

understand? It's because you've become so much a part of the Rafter T, and my thoughts. I don't want anything to stand in the way of that . . . ever."

"You better change your way of thinking, Tana," Doug said gruffly. "My feelings for you ain't something I can share with any other man."

"I-I know that, Doug." Her fingers were creeping around his neck.

Her hushed admission cut him like a knife. He stepped away from her. "You listen to me, girl. If you play with fire, you're bound to get burnt. You or no other woman can dangle two men on a string without making bad trouble. You say you want no more trouble, so let me alone. Let's get on."

He led out, stepping in front of the horse. And Tana shook her head and remained silent.

Another hour saw the trail flattening out and, presently, the Rafter T buildings loomed dark and forbidding below them. Doug wondered what answer lay down there. Tana's sob reminded him that her stake in this was far greater than his. He found her hand.

"Steady, girl," he said. "You get off and sit down here. I'll ride down and look over the ground. If there's shooting, keep out of sight till I come for you."

She gave him an answering pressure and swung silently down. Doug mounted and rode down the trail. Way off yonder he could see the lights of Catamount City—beacons of faithlessness. The Basin otherwise was without a single light that he could detect; it was as if it brooded in the pall of its own troubles. Hitting the flat, Doug rode slowly and warily toward the bunkhouse, his hand on his gun. He was passing the barn when a harsh voice challenged.

"H'ist, feller! Sing out the brand."

"Where's John?" Doug said.

"In town. Who wants to know?" Doug couldn't recognize the voice, and waves of

warning ran along his nerves. Old John wouldn't be in Catamount at this hour. Rafter T must have lost the fight. Stalling for time, he asked, "Any of the boys around? Pete, Wally, Mart?"

"Hell's bells!" The explosion came from Doug's left, near the windmill. "It's Doug Eyton! All right, boys." John Troutman came out of the gloom, gun-bearing shadows closing in behind him. John's hand gripped Doug's. "Glad to see you, son. We had hell here, with them devils holdin' us indoors with a rain of slugs almost all last night."

"While they made off with a herd of your cattle," Doug finished.

"To hell with the cows," the cowman snapped. "They made off with Tana, I reckon. She went to town and never come back. Nobody in Catamount knows anything about her. If them devils—"

"Ease your mind," Doug said. "She's up the trail a piece and, if I ain't mistaken, that's her comin' down right now."

Old John gave a glad exclamation and ran to meet the descending girl. They came back a few minutes later, arm in arm, each too filled with emotion to speak. To break the pause, Doug said, "I've found the spot, boys—in the Devil's Playground beyond the Seep. Time to ride now if we hit it before dawn."

John Troutman's fingers sank into Doug's arm. "Knowed you wouldn't fail, son. Tana's told me about Lefty Papp, which confirms what you feared. He got away and is with 'em now. Come on inside for a drink and a bait of grub. Then, if you're not too tuckered, we'll foller you to hell. Get yore saddles on, boys."

In the lamplight, Old John showed the strain. Past weeks had left marks on him, but his indomitable will showed in the cut of his jaw, and there was fire in his gray eyes.

"We're two shy, Doug," he said, as the younger man ate. "Papp, the traitor, and Straw Skeen, who swallowed a bullet last

night. But today saw us all lookin' at this alike. All the nesters are here to ride to war. It's clean up this thing or quit the cow business."

"All I want," Pete Shafter said from the door, "is to smoke down the loused-up skunk that loosed gun-swelterin' hell onto this peaceful valley."

Tana, slicked up a little after her hard riding, came in to bid her sire farewell and to accompany him outside. With her "God bless you all" ringing in their ears, they got away in a roar of hoofs.

Chapter VIII

FORGOTTEN GUNS

AN HOUR before dawn, Doug split the force at the top of the slide up which he had come from the rustler hideaway. The reek of a freshly-driven herd hung on the air and from below lifted the bawling of the cow critters. Having designated the dozen men he wanted with him, Doug said, "John, stay together and go down at big daylight. They'll run for the lower entrance if they're here, and we'll be there to meet 'em."

Troutman's grunt was all he needed. Every man of the score and a half was on edge, eager for the test. The ride to the north entrance was made without words and when they had dropped into the watered ravine, Doug deployed the men. "Half of you take cover on this side. The rest take the other side down-stream, so's you won't be shootin' one another. I'll slip up-stream for a look-see."

They were scattering out as Doug slipped silently up the draw on foot so as not to rouse sleeping renegades with hoof echoes. It took longer than he had planned. Soon the stars began to pale and he hurried his steps. Now, through the willows where the basalt walls drew apart, he caught the flicker of a puny flame. Man shapes moved in the pallid glow. A man walked down

to the seep, filled the coffee pot. Another lit a cigarette, the match lighting his face. It was Lefty Papp.

Dawn cannoned up in the east. Details grew clearer. Somewhere a coyote wailed—the signal! Rafter T was riding to war. Five men were on their feet at the fire, warming themselves, yawning, their voices a low undertone. Doug sized them up. Papp, the traitor. Illo Miller, the new sheriff. Gringo Price—and Tex Jardine.

Jardine was putting the pot on the fire when the faint, far turmoil of battle came filtering down the draw. Tex paused to listen, set the coffee pot down and leaped for his gun.

"What's that?"

"Boys turnin' them cows from goin' back," Gringo said. "Fool shootin'."

Doug had crept to within four rods of them now. And while they poised, listening, he could have easily cut them down, one by one. But it was not his way. He stepped out into the clear, unobserved.

"Cripes!" Papp almost screamed it. "The fools has stamped 'em! We gotta get out or we'll be tromped." He leaped for his tethered horse, the others following in a blind panic. Doug spun them around with a high yell, menaced them with a restless gun muzzle.

"Hands up, boys! Give up or smoke up."

Papp obeyed instantly, whimpering audibly. The sheriff, too. The rest were frozen, all except Tex Jardine, whose eyes cast that way and this for an out. "It's Eyton!" he barked. "What you askin' for, feller? War?"

"You're surrounded," Doug said. "Cut the chin music and elevate. Good! Now turn your backs!"

They jerked about, Jardine muttering. Whatever he said lashed Gringo Price to draw the gun at Illo Miller's thigh. He whirled, lifted and fired. The bullet grazed Doug's cheek and with the echo Jardine unholstered. His voice was shrill, furious, harsh as the scrape of a file as he spun.

"Die, you clabber-brained, mush-faced loco eater. You've horned in for the last time."

"Maybe it's your last time, Tex!" Doug fired—but at Gringo, who was ahead. The Circle H ramrod loosed a great, vengeful cry and fell, groveling. Doug's weapon swung to Jardine, who came lunging like a drunken man, his pistol spitting slender crimson flashes in the half-light. Doug had been afraid he'd be gunshy, after that other leading-up. But he laughed as Jardine's bullet brushed his side, two inches from his heart. He aimed with terrible deliberation as another slug burned his arm and still another his shoulder.

He hit the trigger and Jardine staggered. He strained, swaying. He tried to line his gun again, and failed. Doug shot him again and he screamed and fell.

The others had scattered, two for their guns and the renegade sheriff for any hole he might pull in after himself. Papp and a man Doug didn't know scooped their guns off their saddles, whirled and fired even as they sped for the cover of the willows. Doug fired, missed Papp. Then the pair had taken cover and their bullets were forcing Doug to the brush shelter. The sheriff had vanished. Firing and yells had risen to a crescendo where Papp and his mate were bushed.

Puzzled, Doug was startled to see Papp come tumbling out of the willows, spin about and fall, face down. An instant later his gun partner darted out, sprinted a couple of rods and spilled in a grotesque, limp somersault. Then three men came into the open with smoking guns in their hands—grizzled men strangely alike in a moth-eaten sort of way. Doug stared. He wondered if he had died and. . . .

One of these men was Huffy Harlow, supposedly dead in San Francisco. Another was a ghost out of Doug's past—Rip Rafferty. The third man was a stranger. With chills running along his spine and a feeling he was dreaming, Doug got up and moved

to meet them. It was no dream. Old Rip's grip was as hard as ever and his snaggletooth grin brought back old times.

"H'are yuh, kid. I want you should meet my two amigos—Huffy Harlow an' Marshal Brice Armer."

Doug hardly felt their hand grips, nor did he hear what they said. He was staring at the banker, whom he had never seen looking so hale. "They told us you'd died in 'Frisco," he managed.

All three laughed. "Had to die," Harlow said, "to get a true line on the man I was groomin' for my place and a cut-in on the bank stock. He'd give me cause to doubt him, and I needed a vacation. False rumor and falser telegrams got results."

Still puzzled, Doug looked at Rip. The old fellow didn't look too good.

"How come," Doug asked, "'Frisco and the prairie country to join hands, with a town marshal between 'em?"

"U. S. Marshal," Huffy corrected. He and Armer seemed amused, but Rip was writhing uncomfortably.

"Like this, kid," he said. "I was—er—payin' off my debt and the warden called me in to say that—"

"Warden? You bin in prison, Rip?"

"Yup. Armer, a human fox if ever you saw one, got under my hide and persuaded me to pay off. When Huffy goes to Brice with somethin' on Jardine, he remembers what I told him about the snake. That-away we got together, Brice springin' me by a parole."

U. S. Marshal! Doug felt the cold breath of the law on his neck now. These three were those he had glassed up, yesterday; he knew that. Armer threw up his head, listening. "What's comin'? Somebody hazin' cattle?"

The draw was suddenly filled with the rolling tumult of the stampede, as the cattle passed some turn that shot the noise upward. Far closer than it had seemed a few minutes before, the cloudburst of hoof and horn was almost upon them.

"It's the stolen Rafter T beef, rollin' down the draw!" Doug yelled. "We gotta get outa this." He turned to run for his horse.

"Wait, kid!" It was Rip Rafferty. "Them critters are plumb on us. You can't make it to your horse. This way."

He led the way into the willows that had hid him only minutes ago.



WITH the three gray men, Doug clawed through the willow tangle, climbed a slight slope and ducked into a sort of chimney in the basalt wall. It formed a protective cup, where the old-timers had tied their horses. Here, pressed close to the animals as if for comfort, the four men waited.

The roar of panicked cattle rose. Now the swift-running herd broke like an avalanche from the dawn mist, their clack and run-bawl deafening. The point shot down the middle of the draw, smashing willows and kicking up dust. The impact of their run was like blows against Doug's body. The frightened critters, lashed on by shooting behind, funneled into the narrowing draw. In mad collision, the outer ranks were thrown against the basalt, spilling, bawling, trampling one another.

Gravel pelted into the cup and one steer, red-eyed and slaving, popped in, wheeled and lunged out. Confusion lessened. A gun spoke somewhere opposite the entrance to the chimney and Doug scrambled up to a point of rock that would give him a view outside. Through the pall of dust came a bitter, heavy-voiced plaint.

"I got enough of this. We can't ride through them cattle and my hide ain't bullet proof."

Someone challenged it. "Quit grousin'. Hey, yonder's cover. Take it!"

Doug pulled himself to a precarious hold on a cockscomb ledge. He saw the four shadows through the dust, driving for the

shelter of the cup. Behind them, all mixed up with the lancing shapes of straggling cattle, he could make out other riders and could see the flash of gun spurts. Somewhere he heard John Troutman bellowing: "Ain't but a handful left. Close in an' wipe 'em out."

Doug looked down into the expectant faces of the three gray men. "Renegade company comin'," he shouted. "Hopin' to make a stand here against Rafter T. Shall we welcome 'em?"

By way of answer, their guns came out. Into the cup came the four riders, crowding. At sight of the occupants, they reared their ponies. One yelled, "A trap!" Being behind, he could whirl and dart out again. From John Troutman came a bawl: "Eat lead or pitch up, you coyote!"

The man swore, tried to run for it, shooting. Dust shrouded Rafter T men and nesters ringed him in a halfmoon of fire. He pitched from his pony. Old John hollered, "Now after the rest."

He led his men past the entrance to the cup, where the real showdown trembled in the balance. The moment it took Doug to shift his eyes from the main draw was like an agony of waiting. Down in the cup, Reno Godey was saying incredulously: "Harlow! Or your ghost!"

"In the flesh, Godey," Harlow shouted. "With me out of the way, you thought you could ride this range with long spurs. Say something, you lousy polecat."

Godey sighed. "You've been misled, Harlow. I'm glad you're back to straighten out the mess Jardine's got the bank into."

"Jardine's dead," the marshal said, and Doug could see Godey pale.

"Dead? Who—"

"Doug Eyton. Jardine wasn't as fast as he figgered."

Godey managed a smile. "Credit one to Eyton. But he's another wild one, Harlow. I learn beyond a shadow of doubt he's an outlaw and responsible for most of our trouble since you left. I—"

"Godey," Harlow's voice was thin, pinched, "you're lower'n a dog. You and yore gang will steal no more ranches an' rustle no more cattle—"

"Have a care!" Godey's lips drew down. "No man can talk to me like that."

"Shut up!" the old banker snapped. "You're lookin' at prison bars, feller. Your stealin' an' dirty work is all done, includin' yore smugglin'. Me an' Rip an' Marshal Brice Armer's got the goods on you, Godey."

Until the mention of the marshal, Reno had breezed it through. Now, from up above, Doug cried, "Look out! He's drawing!"

It was suicide, with the three gray men already gripping their guns. The renegades, with Godey, were snarling oaths as they unholstered. Doug, hanging on for dear life, tried to twist about to do his part, and almost fell. Gunfire reverberated in the cup, overflowing into the main draw. Godey's horse reared, took a bullet and sprawled, hurling its rider to one side. The renegade banker's companions raged, fired wildly and died.

Marshal Armer cried, "Stand, Godey," and blasted a shot at the running man. It struck the lava and screamed away. Godey made it out of the cup, flung astride the horse of his dead hireling.

Doug called, "Godey!" The man's eyes lifted and he saw Doug clinging to his precarious finback, his gun still in its holster in order the better to hold on. Maybe it was the will to bring down a helpless enemy. Maybe it was the impulse of desperation. Whatever the cause, Godey elected to stand and fight. Doug jerked up his pistol, laid the sights on the bright disc of Godey's tobacco tag. He heard the smash of Godey's gun, felt the breath of death as the slug fanned his cheek.

Doug fired then, saw all the evil of the man flood to the surface, followed by a convulsion of pain and fear. He cried plain-

tively and continued to cry as he fell from the saddle, his bleating silenced only when his face smashed down on the rocks.

Doug scrambled down to where the three gray men sat their horses, looking down at Godey's body. Troutman was bringing the boys back, together with those who had been posted at the lower gate. There were introductions, questions and answers, all more or less lost on Doug. After a while he got Rip aside.

"Everything you told me about life, out of Mescalero, was right," he said. "I was bull-headed an' I'm ready to do what you did—pay up."

Rip beamed. "Hush that talk, son. I've told Armer all about the deal and he agrees that you was moved by loyalty and have lived down the mistake. The deal is closed. I'm due for parole if I can get a job. If you could place a old codger like me on yore D Slash E. . . ."

He couldn't finish. Doug's arms were about him, crushing breath from his lungs. "Yo're hired," he croaked, over a lump in his throat. "Even if I gotta tap Huffy for a loan to build back again."

Harlow came up, beaming at him. "You and Rip are the kind the Catamount Bank will be glad to boost, Doug," he said. "You two, and the one yonder that's motionin' me to send you over."

Doug turned.

"Doug!" The call came faintly over the tumult of man-talk. Tana stood beside her horse on the talus. He was not surprised to see her here, for Tana was not one to stay put. But he was surprised at the ecstasy in her expression. She knew about Godey, for Godey lay in plain sight. Maybe she even knew that he had killed. . . .

All at once it came to Doug that Tana didn't have love to waste for the man who had swapped treachery for trust, yet she had love. He saw it in the color of her cheeks, in her flashing eyes. She was smiling as he hurried to her.

Whiskey, a gun, and a job with Red River town's leading cold-decker would make a man of him, crippled Jim Wheeler thought—and to hell with his drunken sheriff daddy!



He tried to throw himself to one side but his body wouldn't move.

BOOTHILL SETS 'EM UP!

By KENT RUTH

THE burn of the raw whiskey was a rasping pain in Jim Wheeler's throat; he gasped for breath as the heavy, choking fumes shot up into his nose. But to go with it there was a fierce,

bitter exultation inside him. A surge of feeling that had its effect quicker than the alcohol. He leaned back against the low wall of the shed, stretching his aching leg straight before him on the ground.

They said he was too young to drink hard liquor! Susan Mintor said that. And his dad—Old Jake—who'd swallowed enough liquor in the last fifteen years to float away the whole town of Red River. Old Jake had promised to fist-whip him if he caught him drinking again.

Jim Wheeler looked down at the foot maimed since childhood, felt his lips curl in a bitter smile. But the dull, aching pain didn't seem so bad now. Whiskey did that for you. It made you forget your pains. It made a man out of you.

He turned up the nearly empty bottle and drained it with a single gulp. This time he didn't choke over it, and the tingling response of the alcohol was a quick jolt inside him.

He was suddenly seeing things clearer than ever before. He thought of Steve Easley, Big Steve who ran the Golden Palace. Steve was a friend of his. Maybe his only friend in Red River. Steve had offered him a job. A job where a gun on your hip made up for a buggered leg.

Well, he'd take that job! To hell with his father and his pious mumblings about whiskey. To hell with Red River—and Susan Mintor, if that's the way she felt. What did they know about a twisted, aching leg? About scorn and—

"Get on your feet!" A low, heavy voice cut through his thoughts, jerked him up off the ground almost before he recognized it as old Jake's. "I thought I told you to lay off that Golden Palace whiskey?"

Pain surged through Jim's leg as he turned to meet that voice. He began to curse. "Go on back to your bottle, old man!" he shouted. "I know what I'm doin' and you ain't going to stop me." He stared hard at the big, red-faced man who had come around the corner of the corral. He made out the nickel star on the man's broad chest, felt the hard force of his accusing eyes.

"I told you I was goin' to fist-whip you the first time I caught you drinkin' whis-

key." There was a funny, flat quality to old Jake's voice. It was usually husky from alcohol. "I told you, didn't I?"

As he stood there, Jim Wheeler was suddenly dizzy. The ball of fire in the pit of his stomach spread out into his arms and legs. He reached behind him to the wall of the shed to steady himself.

"Maybe you did," Jim said slowly. "And maybe I told you to go to hell." Strangely, he was thinking of Big Steve. He never saw the blow that caught him on the point of the chin and smashed him backward to the ground.

"That's to let you know I ain't talkin' through my hat!" He heard the voice coming to him through a heavy fog. "I may be a drunken bum," his father went on, "but I'm still man enough to make you do what I say. And right now I'm tellin' you to lay off that whiskey."

Suddenly Jim was blindly, insanely mad. Old Jake had struck him! An old drunken bum, knocking down his son for taking a drink! It was like a bucket of water dumped over him. He was icy cold when he surged back to his feet, cursing bitterly.

But the sudden dizziness struck him again. He saw the red-faced man before him start to swing. He tried to throw himself to one side, but his body wouldn't move. His head snapped back. He stumbled a step, then lost his balance. Full length he sprawled to the ground.

He tried to struggle to his feet, but a great hand seemed to be holding him down. He cursed weakly to himself and then black unconsciousness swept over him. He dropped back on the ground. . . .



STRANGELY enough, it was a gnawing, sticky thirst that Jim Wheeler felt first. A long minute he lay still, trying to remember where he was. Trying to figure out if the thirst was real or only part of the ugly dreams he'd been having.

Suddenly he sat up, ignoring the flood of pain that surged into his head. It was real all right. He was in the empty corral. The unpainted shed was a bare ugly wall beside him. And a few feet away lay an empty, uncorked whiskey bottle.

The thirst inside him was bitter, mixed with the tortured memories that flooded through him at sight of the bottle. His dad . . . the fight! Old Jake had whipped him! He tried to laugh—a high, ugly laugh that pulled his eyes down to his twisted, aching foot.

Unconsciously his hand slipped to the gun on his hip. And as his fingers closed firmly over the smooth butt of the gun he froze to the swift run of his thoughts.

Whiskey! A gun! With those two he could be a man in the West. Even though that damned twisted leg made him limp as he walked and climb a horse like an Indian. But Red River had sneered at him for the last time. And old Jake had struck him for the last time.

He was as good a man as the next. And a gun would prove it to the first one that wasn't sure. What right did old Jake have to tell him what to do? Hadn't he himself been drunk most of the last fifteen years? Ever since Ellen Wheeler had died and Jim had gotten the bruised foot? Hadn't he almost drunk himself out of the sheriff job?

Bitterly he climbed to his feet, wincing at the sharp pain that lanced through his foot. He limped over to the watering trough and sloshed his aching head into the icy water. The last fullness of the whiskey was pushed back and he felt the gnawing thirst stronger than before.

Big Steve Easley would give him a drink. He'd done it before. Maybe he'd give him that job too. One of those little jobs for men with guts.

There was satisfaction inside him at the thought. Painfully he climbed aboard his little sorrel and started for the Golden Palace. He'd make the damn people of

Red River fear him. They wouldn't laugh at Jim Wheeler and his twisted leg any more. They'd learn to hate him like they hated Big Steve. They'd learn to think of him as a man to be feared. He felt his lips twist up into a smile again. He didn't look down at his bobbing foot. . . .

He left the sorrel at the livery barn and started up the single, dusty street. And, mind preoccupied with his own thoughts, he saw nothing. He would have passed Susan Mintor if she hadn't spoken.

"Jim, I wanted to see you." He stopped suddenly at the sound of her voice, aware suddenly of an aching bitterness inside him. He looked up at her, nervous and ill at ease.

"Hello, Susan."

She was a dark, pretty girl with wide-spaced coal black eyes. But he hardly saw her; his mind was still confused and hurt by the fight with Jake.

"I can't see you tonight, Jim," Susan said. "Dad's working late at the express office and I have to stay with Mother. She's been sick, you know, and—" She broke off suddenly, her voice rising. Jim Wheeler knew what was coming but he didn't meet her eyes. He stared over her shoulder to the swinging metal sign over the Golden Palace.

"Jim! You've been drinking . . . fighting!" Her words were accusing. "I thought—I thought you promised me not to drink?"

Perhaps it was this vague hurt down somewhere inside him that made him act as he did. But he was suddenly aware, too, of the pounding pain in his boogered foot. A pain that seemed to make him sick all over. He never thought as he answered her.

"It's all right," he said harshly, "if you don't want to go out with me tonight. You don't have to. I might get drunk and disgrace you." He ignored her gasp of surprise. Now that it was out he didn't seem to care. He knew he wasn't being

fair, but the words came out anyway.

"If you have anything to say to me you can find me at the Golden Palace."

For a fleeting moment he met her eyes. It wasn't pleasant, what he found there. Crowding out the first look of surprise he saw a new flash of hurt and anger. He recognized it well. She was a daughter of Dave Mintor, all right. And right now she was hopping mad.

"Why, you miserable, drunken. . . ." She was still fumbling for words when he left her. That heavy, cloying thirst swelled his throat again and he pushed down the street toward the Golden Palace. What did he care what she thought. Right now he wanted a drink more than anything else. . . .



THE burn of the whiskey gave him courage, made him feel stronger and surer of himself. He emptied the glass at a gulp and tried to forget his meeting with Susan. He turned toward the back of the saloon.

"Put it on the books, Mike," he called over his shoulder, trying to make his voice sound steady. "I'm goin' back and see Steve." He steadied himself for a moment, his hand on the bar, and then pushed for the back of the room.

Once inside the little cubbyhole of an office he plunged ahead without waiting for the power of the whiskey to wear off. "I'm lookin' for a job, Steve," he began. "I guess I ain't too squeemish about what it is." He felt the same bitter smile pull up his lip again and he stared at the big man before him.

"So you're wantin' a job," Easley repeated almost to himself. Big Steve sat behind the flat table he called his desk and the huge cut of his chest and shoulders seemed to dwarf the tiny room. A heavy growth of beard stubbled his face and his hard gray eyes stared out from beneath

heavy, black brows. But the whiskey was strong inside Jim Wheeler and he met that gaze without flinching.

"I ain't livin' with old Jake any more," he blurted out, "if that's what's stumpin' you." Without moving his eyes he could see the two heavy .45's that criss-crossed Easley's hips. This man was dangerous, but smart with it all. Without feeling he remembered that old Jake had fought him vainly for fifteen years without success. Steve was a good man to work for.

"I ain't so sure you'll be any good to me, kid," Steve began. "You're pretty young, and. . . ." He broke off and Jim watched the gray eyes gleam for a moment and then grow dull again.

"Come to think about it," Easley said then, "you got a little firewater bill in there with Mike. I may dig up something for you to do tonight to wash that off. See you around midnight."

Then he waved his hand toward the door and Jim Wheeler stumbled out. He stopped only long enough to down a drink at the bar and then he was out on the single street of Red River. The sun was warming on his shoulders. The burn of the raw liquor was strong inside him and for the first time he walked down that dusty, shoddy street without feeling the pain in his twisted foot.

He fought back everything in his mind but the single thought that he was going to show Red River that he was a man. The gun at his hip had a strange effect; he threw back his shoulders. The shadow that jogged along ahead of him was smooth, hardly showing a limp. He watched it with grim satisfaction. It was a moment or two before he noticed his shadow had grown to two and the other was keeping pace with him. He stopped and turned.

"Jim, I've been looking for you," the man began. It was Old Jake all right, star and all. He stopped, too, and faced about. "There's something I got to tell

you." His face wasn't as red as usual and Jim thought he saw something in the man's eyes he didn't remember seeing before. A look of worried, nervous thought, as if he was wrestling with a knotty problem.

"What do you want?" Jim demanded.

"It's got to do with Big Steve," the old man went on. "For the last time, I'm telling you to stay away from him. You hear me?"

Jake's words struck something inside Jim Wheeler, a sore spot that made him flinch. "I hear you, but it ain't makin' any difference," he said harshly. "I got me a job with Big Steve. From now on I'm takin' orders from him."

There was a low curse from the old man and he stepped back. For a moment Jim thought he was going to strike him again. He spoke up quickly, loudly, his eyes past old Jake down the dusty street.

"I ain't a kid no more, Jake. I'm warnin' you. You can't try to lick me again." He was suddenly thirsty and he ran his tongue over his sticky lips before he continued.

"You ain't layin' a hand on me again, Jake. You understand? If you try, I'll kill you, Jake. I'll kill you!" For a long moment he met the old man's eyes. In a way it was like the meeting he'd had with Susan. He was cutting another tie with the past. He felt like a man running down a long narrow path with water closing in behind him. There was no turning back now, even if he wanted to.

"But, Jim, tonight it may be—"

Jim turned and plunged past the old man, on down the street. He didn't listen to the words Jake shouted after him. He pushed away that look of fear he'd seen cross his dad's eyes. After tonight there wouldn't be any doubt in the old man's mind that he meant what he said. He wasn't going to be fist-whipped again.

But as he walked down the street he couldn't drive away the crowding thoughts that filled his head. Thoughts of the years

of heavy drinking by old Jake, alternating with his fitful intervals of soberness. A soberness that made him morose, moody and silent. He was a strange, silent man with something behind his eyes that hinted of years he wanted to forget. Of experiences he never tried to share.

Bitterly Jim Wheeler thought of this as he lurched down the street. But that was all over now, he told himself. The hell with the past. To hell with Red River. He hated this town. He hated most of the people in it. He looked at the unpainted sweep of store buildings, at the ugly strip of thick, choking dust that was the main street. At the few straggling houses that nestled behind the stores. He hated it all!

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IT WAS long after midnight when he drifted back into the Golden Palace. Tortured by his own bitter thoughts, he had spent the hours by himself, waiting impatiently for the action that would clear his mind.

Alone at the end of the bar, he had a slow drink to steady his nerves. The town was beginning to go to bed and only a few stragglers remained in the saloon. Dave Mintor, a small, square-jawed man, stood by himself at the other end of the bar. He had to work tonight, Susan had said. Work, he thought bitterly. Like hell! She hadn't wanted to go out with him.

Finishing his drink, he pushed away from the bar and made his way toward Big Steve's office. A muffled command answered his knock; he pushed through the door. It was the number of men in the small room that surprised him. They had to tell him to close the door.

Mike, the barman, stood beside Big Steve. A gunnie they called Poker was sitting on a corner of the big desk. Against the left wall of the small room leaned two lean, hawk-faced gents he'd never seen

before. There was something about the atmosphere in the room he didn't like. He couldn't place the feeling but he wished he'd taken another drink before he left the bar.

There were enough gunmen in here to take over the whole town. And old Jake was probably drinking hard liquor some place with a handful of his cronies. The thought struck him with a sudden, strange force. He stopped in front of Big Steve, aware of the abrupt silence that filled the room. For a long moment he met and held Steve's stare. Finally the big man spoke.

"We're testin' you tonight, kid." There was an unpleasant note in his voice. His eyes didn't change. "The boys here, under Mike and Poker, got a little job on in an hour or so. You're gettin' the chance to show what you got."

One of the two men leaning against the wall laughed. It was the only sound in the room. Jim Wheeler felt the skin at the back of his neck crawl as he stood there, waiting. Finally Steve spoke again.

"Let's see your draw, kid. Face that wall there and make out like you was callin' a bluff." It was a strange command, one that seemed to suck the air out of the room and make breathing difficult.

But Jim Wheeler wasn't caring about that. Here was his chance. His chance to show that the patient months of practice he'd put in on his draw were well spent. His chance to show that a boogered foot had nothing to do with guts when it came to handling a cutter.

And yet, as he crouched down, a strange, half-checked tic of nervousness ran through his body. He never knew why it was, but he botched his draw. His arm moved down slow, jerky. His finger caught leather and it seemed a full second before he had the gun out and leveled at the wall.

"Hell, boss, he's slow as molasses." It was Poker who spoke, and suddenly the tension had gone out of the room. There was a laugh or two and he wanted to pro-

test that he was really fast. That it was only that something had gone wrong with his arm. But it was too late.

There was a smile on Steve's face. "All right, clear out, all of you. You're making this place smell like the back end of a saloon." And then he laughed too loudly, pleased at his own joke.



JIM WHEELER had no time to puzzle at the strange scene he'd just witnessed. They all slipped out the back door of the Golden Palace and mounted their horses. In the darkness he was glad they couldn't see him limp aboard his sorrel. For some reason he felt the old bitterness surging back into his thoughts.

But he jogged along in the middle of the group of riders, following them without question as they nosed out of town in the opposite direction from the saloon. Without a word, the riders disappeared into the night until Jim found himself riding only with Poker.

"We'll meet at the right place," the gunnie grumbled under his breath.

Miles from town they began to circle. It was long past midnight now. Red River had closed down for the night and the little huddle of buildings was lost in unbroken darkness. But by looking up at the dipper he could tell they were wheeling around in a big circle.

As they rode, he felt the heat of the whiskey begin to wear off and in its place came a rising flood of doubt. The jabbing pain in his twisted foot had returned and with it a bitter surge of memories.

In spite of himself, he recalled the mumbled words of pity he'd heard since he was a baby. "Too bad his little foot is crippled!" "I guess he won't ever be able to take Jake's place now, will he?"

He cursed himself for a soft-hearted, sentimental fool and Poker broke the silence. "What's the matter, kid? You ain't

goin' soft on us?" There seemed to be a cold threat behind the words.

They'd made almost a complete circle. Jim was suddenly impatient. Sweat popped out on the back of his neck and dripped down his back underneath his shirt. He wiped his hand nervously on his levis. He needed a drink in the worst way.

"Easy now, kid, we're here." Poker stopped him with a hand on his arm. Quietly they stepped down. In the darkness he could make out the faint outline of a building ahead. The rails of a siding gleamed dully just ahead of them as they ground hitched their horses.

It was the express office at the far edge of town—where Dave Mintor was supposed to be working. But Jim had no time to wonder at this. With Poker leading the way, he started slowly for the dark building. The long ride had been hard on his leg and he had to grit his teeth against the pain that shot up through his body at each step.

But without sound they reached the wall. And as they felt along its length for the door, Jim thought of Big Steve and Mike. "Where's the others," he whispered hoarsely. "I thought they were to meet—"

A rough hand brushed across his face. "Shut up, you fool." Poker found the door as he spoke. He knocked softly—three short raps with a slight pause between. With a slow, eerie creaking the door swung open.

"Okay," a voice whispered.

"Get in!" Poker growled and Jim felt himself shoved into the room. A smoking lantern glowed across the room and he guessed he was in the little-used freight room. A mumble of voices rose from around the lantern. Poker gave him a shove.

"All ready, Steve?" Poker asked. "Here's the new gunhand." The laugh that answered his words seemed to warn Jim Wheeler that something was wrong. But he reached the little lantern burning

on the floor before he realized what it was.



THEN panic welled up in him. He looked at the grim circle of men around the light and, suddenly cold inside, he made out old Jake, his nickel star shining dully.

"Dad!" he whispered.

"Jim!" Old Jake strained forward awkwardly to get a better look, and for the first time Jim saw that the old man was tied. His feet and hands were tightly roped in front of him!

But before he could speak Big Steve broke the silence. "Well, well. If it ain't a chip off the old block." The light flickered over Easley's wide, twisted grin. He was leaning against a heavy, old-fashioned safe. "Remember years ago, Jake, when we went through all this?" Steve went on. "I believe it was a little loose change you were needing then."

What was the meaning of this? Why was old Jake tied up here, grim and silent, instead of with some of his cronies, roaring drunk and telling his wild stories? The questions found no answer in the confused jumble of Jim's mind. He could only stand there dumbly.

"What's up this time, Steve?" Jake said finally. "Is this some more of your dirty blackmail?" Jake was cold sober, and there was a fire to his rheumy eyes that Jim hadn't seen for years.

"Blackmail?" Easley laughed. "What an ugly word to use for the protection I've given you all these years." Steve was in good spirits. "It's only that Jim and me had a little talk this afternoon and decided it was high time you was making Poker here a deputy. Jim sorta wants to throw in with me and Mike and we figured you'd oblige us by givin' Poker a star. It'd make our future dealings all nice and legal."

The brazenness of the lie threw Jim Wheeler off his guard, almost made him

miss the phony ring to the offer. For a moment he couldn't find the words to deny it. To make Poker a deputy! Before he could speak Steve went on.

"That little affair of yours, Jake, years ago. I don't imagine the good people of Red River would care to know about that." The smile still played across his face but this time the words had lost their good humor. They were hard, cold-cut now and there was no mistaking the threat behind them. "You ain't been no great-shucks as a sheriff since them days, but they still think you're pretty all-fired honest. You wouldn't want to disappoint them, now would you, Jake?"

had taken him in, given him a chance. It was more than old Jake had ever done for him.

Silently he stood a minute longer, not knowing what to say. They seemed to have forgotten he was here. Steve went on, his voice cold.

"We got ways to persuade you, Jake. You see, we ain't taken in none by this sandy you and the kid are trying to work."

"What in hell you mean?" Old Jake's question popped out almost before Jim understood what Steve had said. He and Old Jake working a trick together!

"Just this," Easley said slowly. "You ain't gettin' away with the money here in

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Suddenly Jim thought he began to see what was behind all of this. At least one thing was clear now. Those years of drinking. Those years of brooding, tormenting silence. Old Jake had done something once. Something Big Steve had known about and had held over his head ever since. That explained the whiskey. Whiskey was the only thing that could take the bitter gall from a man's conscience.

"I ain't doin' it, Steve," Jake clipped, leaning forward angrily until his body almost touched the lantern set on the floor. "The reason I had for lettin' you black-mail me all these years ain't workin' now. You've taken Jim here, filled him full of your rotgut and pushed him into this hold-up with you. It's your game. Go ahead and play it out. I ain't makin' no deputy out of a two-bit outlaw."

Jim Wheeler felt emotion pulling him first one way and then the other. For the first time in his life he was feeling a growing admiration for the man he'd always known as a drunken, worthless father. He had courage. And yet Big Steve Easley

the safe and then layin' in on me!" Steve's voice began to rise. "When you came in this morning and offered to tip me off to a big wad of cash, I smelled something. You said all you wanted was for me to stay away from the kid here. And then he comes in right after and asks for a job. That's when I knew what was up. You thought you could trap me like I trapped you way back there. But it ain't working, is it Jake?"

◇ ◇ ◇

SUDDENLY Jim Wheeler began to fit together the pieces of the puzzle.

This was a frame-up. Only it was Big Steve who'd planned it! With him as the goat! Big Steve thought *he* was working for old Jake! He almost laughed aloud. Moving backward a step, it was the hard, steady boring of a gun barrel in the small of his back that froze him to the spot.

"Steady, youngen." It was Poker who whispered the command. For the moment panic swept over Jim like a bucket of cold

water. Maybe Big Steve was wrong but he meant business!

"What about this deputy talk?" Old Jake said.

"Just an idea I had," Steve said easily. "But I've changed my mind now. I don't think I could trust either of you." There was a brief silence. When he went on his words were suddenly low. "I think now we'll just kill you both. Mike can blow open the safe here and we'll leave the two of you near it. It'll look like you caught the kid blowing it and had a shoot out."

Somehow the cold, evenness of the words acted as a bracer to Jim Wheeler. In that moment he understood a lot of things. He understood the meaning of that strange scene in Steve's office before they left. That draw! They wanted to know how fast he really was!

"Dynamite the safe, Mike," Big Steve whispered. "We'll take care of the rest."

But Jim was hardly listening. In that brief second all the details of that shadowy room suddenly stood out in relief like a play caught in the middle of an act.

It was time to act. One split second his eyes caught old Jake's, held the intense stare.

"Let her go, Jim!" the old man yelled as he dropped to the floor, away from Poker's pressing gun. With a single motion of his two tied hands, Jake grabbed up the lantern and threw it against the far wall. On the heels of shattering glass, a heavy darkness pressed into the room. And then overhead the world erupted like a smoking, boiling volcano.

It was a hopeless fight, Jim Wheeler told himself from the start. Five against two, and one of the two unarmed!

Slugs screamed in all directions and Jim poured back his lead at the gun flashes. It was the brief advantage of one against a mob. It wouldn't last. But two cries of pain, following each other in quick succession, told him his shots had gone home.

Then they began to find him. A gun

roared in his face and a bullet knocked him down.

Rolling desperately toward old Jake, Jim groped for the hand truck and wheeled it in front of him. Big Steve and Poker were still left.

"I'm right beside you, son." The words startled him before he recognized old Jake's voice. There was a comforting sound to the booming gun beside him. The old man must have found a gun and was firing with both hands tied straight out in front of him.

Suddenly the whole room lighted up. It took a moment to find the cause. Then, with a start of terror, he saw it. The kerosene from the shattered lantern had caught fire with a quick spurt of flame.

The fight was brought out into the open now; limned against the sudden light he saw Poker, crouched and ready. He and old Jake must have fired together. They saw Poker jerk to his feet, and then as the flames crept up higher on the far wall, he fell to the floor. But Big Steve . . .

A gun opened up almost beside them and Jim heard a cry of pain from old Jake. "Watch him, son! There . . . by the safe!" He collapsed on the floor on his face. With a scream of triumph, Big Steve jumped up from the floor and charged across the room—a perfect target.

Deliberately, Jim Wheeler jerked up his gun, sighted the big gambler and squeezed back on the trigger. The hammer snapped on a spent shell! Frantically he threw the useless gun away, fumbling for the gun old Jake had fired. But it was no use. Steve was bearing down on him.

Then with all the strength in his aching body, he seized in both hands the heavy hand truck he'd been crouching behind and shoved it at Big Steve. It was the last, frenzied act of desperation. But in that brief moment, as the big man was framed against the leaping flames, the truck caught him square. It picked him up, rolled on into the fire. There was one fierce, agon-

izing scream of pain and then the whole room seemed to blow up.

The dynamite! Jim thought of it even as the room seemed to blow apart. Then he went out cold.



THE first thing he knew someone was dragging him by the arms and there was a brilliant light in his eyes. Then gradually, as the foggiess began to leave him, strange sounds grew into words and words into whispered sentences.

"Maybe Big Steve didn't have it figured right, son, but right now it's a pretty good story to stick by."

It was Jake! He'd only been nicked then, in there. Abruptly Jim opened his eyes. Overhead he saw the freight house a solid wall of flame. Jake was dragging him outside.

"When I saw you driftin' toward Big Steve," the old man went on, "I knew I had to do something. That's why I told him about the money in the safe. Figured I could trap him and kill him in the fight. Me, it didn't matter much about after all these years. But you comin' in right after me made him suspicious."

Full consciousness returned finally and Jim Wheeler crawled to his feet. Together they cleared the building. "But why didn't you get help?" he demanded.

"I was plannin' on plenty of it, son," Jake told him. "Only for tomorrow night! When Big Steve got suspicious he sent a couple of his gunnies to pick me up. I never got a chance to tell anyone."

"Then there really wasn't any money in the safe?"

"Not a cent! But it was a chance I had to take. I guess it was little enough after all these years of hell."

The question formed then in Jim Wheeler's mind. He had asked it almost before he thought. "That affair, dad, Big Steve's

been holding over you? What was it?"

For a long minute they stood there silently, and he began to think he wasn't going to get an answer. The old man just stood, staring out straight before him as if at a ghost. But he spoke finally.

"It was right after your mother died. Died from the same accident that boogered up your foot. Her last words were to make me promise to take you to St. Louis."

"It's all right, dad," Jim broke in. Somehow that foot wasn't so important as it had been this morning.

"I should have gone to friends for the money," the old man went on. "But I thought I could take it from the bank easier. Just take it for a while and then see they got it back later. That's when Steve came in. He took the money, and after that . . ."

People were all around them now and he broke off helplessly. Dave Minton and Susan were making for them. Jim Wheeler had to shout to make himself heard.

"What the hell, Jake!" He slapped the old man's shoulder. "After all, it's over now! And it took Steve to do what we couldn't do ourselves for fifteen years—put us on the same side of the fence."

One of these days he'd get around to going to St. Louis, he guessed. But right now, Susan was in his arms and old Jake was busy explaining to Dave Minton just what had happened.

"Well, you see Dave, I'd figured out it was about time we clamped down on Big Steve. Didn't figure I'd need you. Just made Jim here a deputy and . . ."

He was no longer listening. The flames from the burning freight house were just bright enough for him to see the gleam of pride in Susan's eyes.

"I'm sorry about this afternoon," she whispered.

He kissed her then. He could afford to be generous. Didn't old Jake just say he'd made him a deputy?



Men died quickly
because of disputes
over cards and
brawls induced by
booze. . .

THE TOWN THE DEVIL BUILT

By DICK TUTHILL

A horde of Texas gunmen made good its boast to send Marshal Mike McCluskie to Newton town's fast-growing Boothill . . . but the killers forgot the dead man's shadow, consumptive Jim Riley, and the particular hell he could, and did, raise. . .

BLOODY NEWTON, toughest town on the Texas trails, where Colt was king and men died in powdersmoke. It has been told that Dodge had its man for breakfast each morning, but Newton dished up one for breakfast, dinner and supper, with a few in between for appetizers.

It flourished for one season, then faded when Wichita became the terminal for the

trail dives. But in its short life Newton saw more gun fights and pure hellraising, and more gents buried with their boots on, than any other trail town.

A solid block of saloons, dancehalls and honkatonks waited for the trail riders until they'd collected their pay, let out their spurs, and came roaring in for fun and fighting. The Bull's Head, Legal Tender, Alamo, Mint, Side Track, Blue Front and Red Front, were just a few of the better-known hell spots on Main Street.

From dark until dawn the pianos and fiddles groaned out tunes for stamping feet, bars were crowded with riders who washed out memories of the long trail with rotgut whiskey. It took only a word to send these men on the prod—then Colts flamed and hell was on the loose!

Night and day tinhorns, fancy gals and just plain tough gents fattened on the dinero of the riders who'd earned the money by risking their necks on the long drives. In one saloon a prize fight might be going on, while right next door, itinerent wearers of the cloth exorted their listeners. And while they preached, the gambling and dancing went right on.

An old-timer once said of Newton, "She was like a Fourth of July celebration that ran all the way around the clock and never quit for Sundays."

Yes, Newton was tough, wide open, ate her meat raw—and men died with their boots on. Men died quickly because of women, personal feuds, faction wars, disputes over cards and brawls induced by booze. . . .

The first cows to hit Newton were those of the Jug iron and one of the riders of the brand, a gent named Pat Welsh, was the first man to fill a grave in Boothill.

Welsh and another rider, Joe Snyder, had some trouble on the way up from Texas, but true to the code that "The cows come first" they'd not brought the fight to a head until the beef had been delivered to the buyers and the work finished.

The Jug riders were paid off in the Alamo; they had their trail drink with the boss and then Welsh and Snyder stepped out on the street. Fighting words were passed, both men went to leather and the guns came out. Welsh died there in the dust and Snyder was so badly hit that he never rode again.

Mike McCluskie was night marshal in Newton. He was a big man, quiet, taciturn, but his temper was as raw as fresh-killed beef. He was fast with both guns and fists, was always ready and willing to match punches or his draw with any gent who felt lucky, and there were plenty such in Newton.



McCLUSKIE'S orders were to run the town "wide open and let the boys have all the fun they want" and he did just that thing. Mike had a shadow, a thin, eighteen-year-old kid with a sunken chest and a hacking cough. His name was Jim Riley, but to the men of Newton he was "Mike's Shadow," for it was an even bet that when the marshal came down the street or loafed around in one of the spots, Riley was somewhere within sight.

Some said that Jim was Mike's brother, others that he was Mike's son by a dancehall girl, down on the border. But only one thing was certain: there was pure hell in store for any tough gent who picked on Jim. Sooner or later, McCluskie would hunt that man up and face him with fist or gun.

McCluskie's night helper was Billy Bailley, an ex-gambler who wore three notches on his irons and always took the side of the Texas men when fights came up. He was loud-mouthed and never overlooked a chance to gun-whip a drunk. McCluskie and Bailley rodded the law together, but outside of their duty they were sworn enemies.

In August of 1874 the voters in Newton

went to the polls to decide whether or not the town would raise a large sum of money to extend the railway. Bailley was an election judge and when Mike came in to cast his ballot, Billy challenged his right to vote.

McCluskie knocked Bailley down, took away his guns then dragged him back to his feet and gave him a savage beating.

Newton buzzed with talk of that fight. The tinhorns were offering odds that there'd be a shoot-out within twenty-four hours.

That same night someone carried word to Mike that Bailley had picked up another pair of guns and was down at the Red Front making war talk. Mike went down to the saloon, walked in and found Billy standing at the bar.

Mike dove in with fists flying and again Bailley took a beating. When he realized he was licked, Bailley ran out of the place yelling taunts and dares at the marshal; he challenged him to come outside.

The Red Front was filled with Billy's Texas friend but not a man horned in on the play. However, there were muttered comments that any gent who used his fists instead of a gun was a yaller coyote. Mike heard the talk and his raw temper flared. He faced the room full while he told them off, then he turned his back on them, walked out the front door.

The men inside heard the smashing thunder of the Colts out there in the street. When they ran out they found Billy dead in the dust. . . .

McCluskie killed three men in the week following his fight with Bailley. Word went down the trail that the night marshal was on the hunt for Texas men. Every drive that came in brought riders who honed to test the temper of McCluskie.

While things were boiling, seventeen hundred cows in the Cross J iron hit town. They were owned by Cliff Anderson, down on the Panhandle, and the drive was in charge of his son, Ed.

It so happened that Bailley had once been a pardner of Cliff Anderson when they

were running wet cows across the border. When Ed Anderson heard that McCluskie had killed his father's former pard, he swore that he was personally going to pick up the cards where the dead man had dropped them. Thus the final scene of the McCluskie-Bailley feud was set. It took place in Tuttle's dancehall.

Mike was out of town on business when the Cross J drive came in and he hadn't heard of Anderson's threats. He rode back to Newton late on Saturday night and friends warned him that the Cross J was after his scalp. But Mike had never backed away from any thing.

Tuttle's place was running full blast when the marshal walked in and took a seat at one of the rear tables.

Jim Riley had followed Mike in, but the kid didn't sit down at the table. He walked around a bit and then took his stand near the front door; he stood leaning against the wall while dry coughs racked him.

Suddenly the door was pushed open and Cliff Anderson, followed by most of his riders, stalked in. The Texans ranged themselves along the wall and a silence shut down on the room.

After the hellabaloo that had been going on, the silence in that room was almost like a roar. Then Anderson stepped clear of his men and started down the floor.



MIKE probably realized that this was the showdown. He must have known that the play was planned and the deck fixed.

Anderson had one hand behind him when he came up to Mike's table, the other hand was splayed over the gun on his leg, ready to go to leather. There was a wolfish grin on the young Texan's face.

"Get up on yore laigs so's I kin throw my lead into yore guts, you damned murderin' dog!"

Mike pushed back his chair and started

to get up. He knew this youngster wouldn't be hard to shade, but when he drew he knew that the other Texans in that room would cut in and shoot him to doll rags. So his hands were clear of his irons as he came up.

But Anderson hadn't aimed to give the marshal a break. As he finished his fighting talk he brought his hand around from behind his back—and it was gripping a .45.

Twice he dropped hammer before Mike was on his feet, then he leaned down to look at the dying man under the table while his riders moved up to have them a look-see.

Mike was on the floor, ringed by the men who'd rigged the play to kill him, his hoarse, labored breathing the only sound in the room. Then a door slammed shut, a key grated in the lock and the Texas men swung with their hands dropping to leather. . . .

His back to the door he'd just slammed and locked, pale blue eyes glaring hate at the men who'd downed his best friend, there he stood: Jim Riley, Mike McCluskie's shadow.

Jim's hands were rock steady when they flashed inside his torn shirt and came back into sight, filled with the guns he'd picked up in the polling place.

His thumbs dogged the hammers and the big Colts bucked and flamed, the jar of the concussions making the oil lamps flicker and then go out. In the darkened room, orange flashes criss-crossed the place. Every gun was out and thundering but the Texans were firing blindly at a target that was always on the move.

Seconds were like hours in that hell of flame and gun thunder, of breaking glass and the sound of bodies hitting the floor. Then again came quiet.

It was a long time before the crowd out on the street got up enough nerve to enter the room. One of the barmen struck a light and soon the yellow glow of the oil lamp lit the place.

Nine men lay dead or dying on the floor. Anderson was atop the body of the marshal, coughing up the blood that choked his lungs. Near him lay the body of his trail boss and those of four of his riders while farther back were two of the housemen who'd died with guns in their fists. Jim Riley had taken a heavy toll for the life of his friend.

That fight in Tuttle's place set a record for gun battles that never has been broken in trail town history.

But when the lights came up after the fight, Jim Riley was nowhere in the room, nor had any gent seen him leave. His going is still a mystery. Some figure that he drifted out and hit for Mexico. Others opine that he was bad hit by the Texas lead and crawled away to die, but Jim Riley was never again seen in Newton.

On Sunday morning a coroner's jury decided that Mike McCluskie had been murdered by Anderson, but Jim's killings of the Texans was justified, and they cleared him of all blame. The sheriff started looking for Anderson but his friends got him clear and sent him back home, where he died of his wounds. Every member of the coroner's jury was warned to leave town or be killed, and not a man of them stayed on to test the truth of the warning.

There used to be a little cowtown, up in the grass country of the Powder River, and a bent, dried-up little man with a hacking cough hung around the one saloon in the place. He swamped out the bar for his meals and when he wasn't working he'd sit behind the stove and watch the riders play cards.

No one ever heard him speak and no one knew his name, just called him Swampy. He died in 1898 and was buried just outside of town. When they fixed him up for the grave, they found his body was scarred with the marks of six bullet wounds and on his right shoulder was tatooed the initials J. R.

BUNKHOUSE JARGON

By NEVADA DICK

Part X of the Western Fan's Pocket Dictionary

In compiling "Bunkhouse Jargon," the writer has endeavored to list the most common phrases and terms used by those hardy pioneers who migrated and established homes in that vast domain which was known as the American Frontier. Some of the phraseology is now obsolete, but much of it is still used in many parts of the West, principally in the cattelands.

In defining these terms of a past era, the writer in many cases has set down the explanations as given by old-timers, ignoring the rules of the grammarian.

NEVADA DICK

GUN SWIFT—One adept at throwing a gun or making a quick draw.

GUN TIPPER—A hombre who, instead of drawing his gun, fired through an open-ended holster. Such a gun artist simply pushed down on the gun butt, the holster swiveling at the belt. This allowed the muzzle to rise and the gun was discharged from the hip.

GUN TOTER—Said of one who habitually went armed and was not adverse to using the weapon upon the least provocation.

GUN WISDOM—Knowledge of how to use a gun under any and all conditions.

GUT SHOOT—The act of shooting another in the belly.

HABLANDO—Spanish, to speak.

HABLAR—Plainsmen's word for a confab or talk.

HACIENDA—Spanish, a ranch or landed estate.

HACKAMORE—A breaking halter having either one or two reins.

A derivation of the Spanish word *jaquina*, meaning a horse bridle without a bit.

HAGGLE—To dispute over trifles; wrangle or bargain over a sale.

HAIR BRAND—Or cold brand. Act of applying a branding iron against an animal's body long enough to singe the hair but leave no permanent burn on the hide. This method was used by dishonest riders, making it an easy job for their confederates to place another brand upon the calf and claim the critter should the animal escape detection.

HAIR LIFTER—A nervous reaction. Also a frontier term for the Indians when on the war-path and bent upon a scalping expedition.

HAIR ROPE—A rope constructed of horse hair.

HAIR TRIGGER—A gun on which the mechanism has been filed so that the slightest touch upon the trigger discharges the weapon. Also means a person with a short temper.

HALF-BREED BIT—A bit with a narrow hump in the middle of the mouth bar, shaped similar to a croquet wicket and about two inches in height, with a roller inside the hump. This vertical wheel is barrel-shaped and has a corrugated rim.

HALF-BREED HOLSTER—A holster with an open end through



which a weapon may be discharged by simply tipping on the hip of the wearer.

HALF-COCKED—A spontaneous talker who expresses his opinion or acts before ascertaining the full particulars. Such a person is said to "go off half-cocked."

HALF-PINT—A small person; a runt.

HAMSTRING—Alludes to the cutting of the Achilles tendon of an animal, making it helpless to control its leg.



HAMMER HEAD—A horse whose head bulges out between the eyes, giving it the appearance of the head of a claw hammer.

HAND—A measurement of 4 inches, which is used in determining the height of a horse, the measure being taken from the ground to the highest part of the shoulders, or withers, of an animal. Thus a measurement of sixty inches is called a fifteen hand horse.

HANG AND RATTLE—Old-timer's way of expressing the act of sticking until the finish, even though it may result in one being strung up by the neck and his bones left to swing and rattle in the breeze.



HANG UP HIS HIDE—Getting even, or squaring an account over a real or fancied wrong.

HANGTOWN—The original site of Placerville, California, which, due to the hanging practiced there by the miners of 1850, caused it to be so named.

HANKER—To crave or wish for a certain object or place.

HAPPY HUNTING GROUNDS—The Indians' Heaven.

HARD MONEY—Meaning coin, which even to this day is preferred by the Westerner, who refers to greenbacks as folding money. This preference for coin dates back to the early days when there were no banks, and the old-timer was forced to hide his money in a post hole or beneath the hearth. Buried in a can it would be protected against loss. Paper would become mouldy or torn.



HARD NUT TO CRACK—Something difficult of accomplishment, or one hard to persuade.

HARP—Meaning the act of repeating a grievance.

HARPIE—Frontier term for a lewd woman.

HASH SLINGER—A frontier waitress; also called a biscuit-shooter.

HAWKINS RIFLE—A famous rifle carried by pioneers of the old Santa Fe trail. These guns were the product of the gunsmiths Samuel T. and Jacob Hawkins, of St. Louis, Missouri, and were usually made in .50 calibre and sold by them to the plainsmen at around \$60.00 each.



HAY BURNER—A horse kept in a stall and fed hay and grain instead of being turned out to pasture.

HAYWIRE—Twisted or muddled. An expression which originated from the way one has of disposing of the wire used in bailing hay, and which when removed is twisted into a mess of tangled wire before being thrown away. If left loose stock would become entangled in it.

Strawboss of Hell's

Chapter I

SIXGUN SUBSTITUTE

THE two cowhands, sprawled on the bench in front of the Diamond-C bunkhouse, watched with mild interest how the stranger walked up the path

from the corrals where he had just left his blaze-faced roan. He was a tall man with flat-lidded hazel eyes and bronzed, tight skin that had obviously felt the rigors of sun and wind. They noticed that he walked



*A dramatic, actionful novelette
of the cow country*

By ROD PATTERSON

Grazing Ground

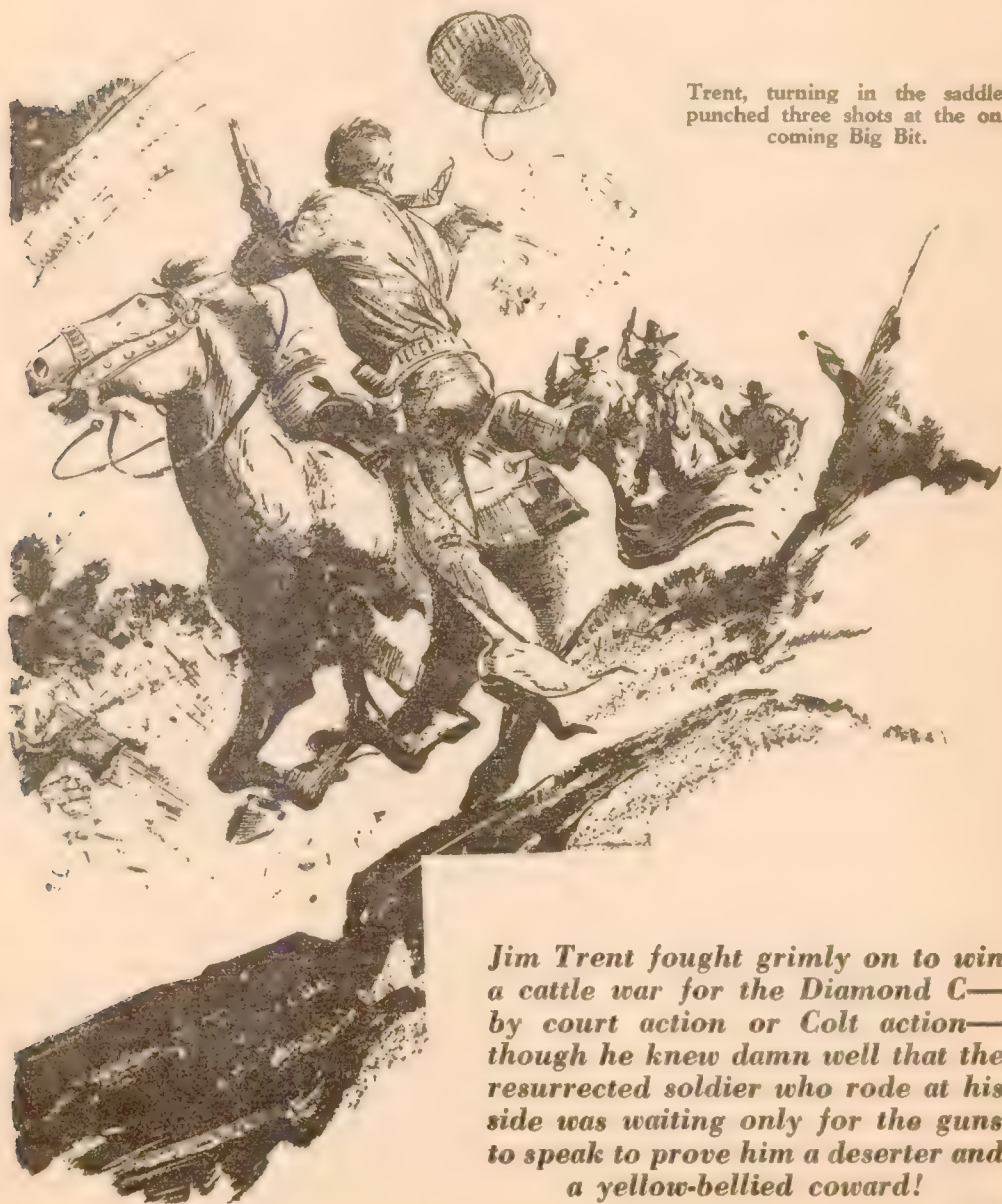
like a man with a load of trouble on his back; they knew he was a stranger by the way he paused to fumble with the gate.

Gabe McNaffy, one of the hands, stood up with a visible effort and ran a finger under his hot, stiff collar, for he was dressed in his Sunday best, though this was only Friday.

The stranger opened the gate finally and said, in a slow, murmuring voice, "Is this here Cass Conrad's spread?"

Gabe McNaffy nodded. "That's right, mister; that's the big house back yonder on the left.

"Cass happen to be around?" the stranger said then.



Trent, turning in the saddle, punched three shots at the oncoming Big Bit.

Jim Trent fought grimly on to win a cattle war for the Diamond C—by court action or Colt action—though he knew damn well that the resurrected soldier who rode at his side was waiting only for the guns to speak to prove him a deserter and a yellow-bellied coward!

"Yep." McNaffy was lean and stoop-shouldered and made wrinkled by long years; he had washed-out blue eyes and an expression of soberness and natural wisdom. "Cass is here," he said. "It's his funeral we're holdin' this afternoon."

The stranger's face did not change. He said gravely, "Why, I didn't even know he was dead."

"He was killed," the old man said flatly. "Day 'fore yest'd'y."

"I just rode up from the Nueces," the stranger explained. "Is his daughter here?"

"Yep; she's here. But Miss Virgie's cut-up consid'able. That's two Conrads that've been bedded down sudden-like. Her brother Rob's gone too—was killed fightin' Injuns out in Arizony."

The stranger's eyes seemed to darken. "I heard about Rob," he admitted. Then: "How was the old man killed?"

"Fella named Mitch Rawson done it. Cass kinda grabbed the runnin' iron by the hot end. He accused Mitch o' rustlin' Diamond-C."

Kindness, sympathy was printed on the stranger's blunt-boned face. "Gun fight?"

"Jest another case o' slow, mister. Pore ol' Cass was really done in by his own rheumatics. Mitch's lead would never've touched him ten years ago."

The stranger nodded, then turned and walked up the beaten path toward the log-sided house. Virginia Conrad, last of the Texas Conrads, answered his knock on her front door and asked the long-limbed stranger in.

He held his old black hat in his hand and said, "I'm Jim Trent."

She showed him a chair by the open fireplace. "I suppose you're a friend of Dad's." Her violet eyes were tear-blurred, her sun-tanned cheeks stained by recent weeping. "He had a lot of friends I never knew."

"I knew of your father," Trent told her truthfully and then lied. "When I heard in Galena he'd . . . passed away, I thought

I'd ride up and pay my respects." He did not look at the dark-haired, dark-eyed girl. He'd have recognized her anywhere, though. So this was Rob Conrad's sister!

She was prettier, more delicately featured even than her daguerreotype had made her out to be, and he had seen her picture on the bare wall of the barracks at Fort Ketterman a thousand times. Her brother Rob always had said to him in those days, "Jim, if me and you get through this campaign, you gotta go back to Texas with me and meet the finest gal the Southwest ever raised."

It seemed longer ago than six months when he and Rob would saddle up to ride patrol and the reckless-eyed Texan would salute the tintype on the wall and say, "Well, so long, Sis. Goin' out to kill a few 'Paches today. Maybe get old Geronimo hisself."

The Arizona Territory suddenly seemed closer to this cool and shady ranchhouse than was exactly comfortable for Jim Trent. Back there then, Trent would remove his hat to Virginia's picture and say, "Young lady, if I had a sister as pretty as you, I'd take better care of my ornery hide than this loco brother of yours does."



ROB CONRAD would laugh at Trent's seriousness, and would continue to chide him good-naturedly for being too cautious. But Trent had his answer. "Okay, fella, go ahead and take chances with your top hair! Me, I'm playin' it safe. Life's a thing that oughta be respected and took care of—not just chucked away, like you seem bent on doin'!"

Trent and Rob Conrad had enlisted in General Massey's regiment at Flagstaff, three years or so before. Trent, a rider for a Panamint, Nevada, cattle outfit, had joined the cavalry using an assumed name—this only Rob Conrad knew—for no

other reason than that an innate modesty compelled it; he had no wish to seek applause from his friends when he was finally mustered out.

But the day came, as Trent feared it would, when Rob failed to ride back to Fort Ketterman after a clash with Geronimo's Apaches in the Magdalena hills. There had been a third trooper with them on this patrol, and it had been the death of this man that had later brought ruin and disgrace to Jim Trent.

They had come suddenly upon a party of Indians, ten miles out from the fort. Trent, under orders as a sergeant to report the approach of any such formidable war party to headquarters, had warned Rob of the danger of exposing himself to the enemy. But Rob had only laughed, had ridden recklessly in close to the raiding Apaches. Angrily, Trent had started back with O'Brien, the third trooper, toward the fort.

But half way back, he could stand it no longer, had ordered O'Brien to warn the regiment, and had turned and ridden back to help his foolhardy comrade. He did not learn until the next day that O'Brien had never reached the fort alive. Trent had found Rob's horse and signs of a bloody fight. Shocked, grief-stricken, he had reported Conrad killed in action. But he had been court-martialed out of the cavalry for neglect of duty. And so he had lost his friend and his reputation because he had been foolish enough to try to save one man's life at the risk of the garrison.

Sitting now in the living room of the Conrad ranchhouse, Virginia saw Trent staring queerly at the tintype on the fireplace mantle-piece.

"That's my brother," she explained. "Rob died in Arizona six months ago. Maybe you heard the story; it was in all the papers. A coward, his own saddle-mate, ran out on him."

Trent's face was utterly still. He couldn't tell her now. Maybe later on,

when the shock of her father's death had passed.

"Did read something about it," he murmured. "Maybe, though, there's two sides to the story. I heard this side-kick of his didn't really run out on your brother; I heard he was cashiered out of the Army for neglect of duty."

"He was probably broken for cowardice," she said with tight scorn. "Wherever did you hear that story, Mister Trent?"

"Served three years under General Massey, myself."

"Oh, then maybe you knew Rob," she said eagerly. "Maybe—"

"No." Trent didn't know why he lied. Perhaps it was the way this girl looked at him. Now he just wanted to comfort her. So he lied: "No; I never knew your brother, miss."

"Where did you meet my father?" she asked presently.

"I—well—I didn't exactly know him, either. I just heard about him. I was ridin' up through Galena and heard you folks was havin' some trouble with a wild-cat outfit and needed a good man." He paused, then asked quietly, "Is it ridin' gun, this job?"

"No," she said emphatically. "I don't want to hire a gun hand. Just a man . . . who isn't afraid."

Trent was recalling Rob Conrad's words: "Dad was the first cattleman to settle in Okolono Valley, and he took the best chunk o' range in that country. He held it for years against the worst pirates you ever saw. One of 'em's still there—the worst o' the lot. Rawson's his handle. This hombre figures dad's too old now to fight, and has no rights to grass he can't throw lead for. That's why I'm headin' home as soon's my time's up here."

Trent's eyes were clouded as he looked at the girl. He'd had enough troubles of his own to last him a while, without sticking out his neck for somebody else. And yet, here he was doing just that. Rod Con-

rad's bantering voice seemed suddenly to speak from the dead past: "You're fallin' for that sister o' mine, soldier. I can tell the way you look at her picture. Well, you wouldn't make such a bad brother-in-law—if you had nerve enough to ask her. Which you ain't!"

Virginia said, "I—I know this isn't the time to talk business, but I like your looks. You're hired." Presently, she explained, "Mitch Rawson owns the Big Bit, ten miles down Bitter Creek from here; the creek's our southern boundary. Rawson's south of it. He's a killer. And a rustler."



TRENT nodded, and she went on in her low, musical voice: "I can't pay much. But I'll need someone to take charge of Diamond-C, sort of. Gabe McNaffy and Sam Bird have both worked here for years, but they're getting old now, and I can't allow them to take risks like—like dad did."

Trent said, "Of course not." He left her then, and went back and put his roan in the corral and went out to find McNaffy and Bird. He discovered Gabe sitting in the stable archway, mending a bridle. The old cowhand's seamy face lit up with pleasure when Trent introduced himself and stated in a brusque voice what his position at Diamond-C would be in the future. Trent asked the old man to ride with him for an hour while he, Trent, inspected Conrad beef.

The two men rode out on the grass flats north of Bitter Creek. All along these rolling hills, on both sides of the creek, Trent saw scattered cattle grazing in the sunlight. When they rode in close, scouting that beef, Trent saw that some of it was Diamond-C, some Big Bit, and some was Diamond-C with Rawson's vent mark on it, which indicated a sale. There was the Big Bit brand below this vent mark, sanguinary proof that Mitch Rawson had purchased it.

"That's Rawson's own way o' stealin' every fat cow he can git his dirty hooks on," McNaffy declared angrily. "When you call him on it, he just claims Rob Conrad sold it to him—and Rob's dead now and can't call him a liar. When pore ol' Cass tried to drive his own stuff back here across the creek, Rawson shot him and told folks it was Cass who was the rustler!"

"Pretty sharp," was Trent's only comment.

McNaffy said, "Only guns'll settle it, Trent. Yuh got yoreself a chore when yuh took this job."

"There'll be other ways to handle Big Bit," Trent said, "besides layin' a gun on Rawson."

McNaffy stared at the new foreman with open amazement. But he did not speak. Presently they rode back to the ranch. Later, they sat on the bunkhouse bench and smoked in silence. An hour before the time set for Cass Conrad's funeral, Sam Bird hurried up.

"There's some riders comin' in from the timber," he said. The old cowhand's bony face was flushed, expectant. "An' they're comin' fast."

McNaffy's boots hit the ground with a rap. He nodded to the silent Trent and said, "Rawson." That was all.

The high sounding-board of the corral fence lifted the echoes of three fast-moving horsemen as Trent and the two old men came out from behind the stable.

"'Round here," Sam Bird said laconically, "trouble travels fast. It's Mitch, all right. He allus rides like a high wind goin' down the road."

The owner of Big Bit and his men swept up in front of the Diamond-C crew and stopped in a cloud of dust. Mitch Rawson was a middle-aged man with gray-streaked black hair and a square blunt face which had no distinction other than a pair of merciless hard eyes and a mouth like a trap. Sizing him up deliberately, Trent guessed certain things: this man would

thrive on turbulence and strife. Egotism showed on his stubble-bearded face, passion, and a temper which would know no restraint if his brutal and selfish will was crossed.

Rawson leaned forward over his saddle horn, pinning a questioning glance on Trent. He sat in silence for a long moment, staring out of baleful, suspicious eyes. Then he moved his gaze to Gabe McNaffy and said, "Tell Miss Virginia I wanta talk."

McNaffy stood beside Trent, the skirts of his Sunday coat pushed back to show the heavy Colt pistol on his belt. "We're holdin' a funeral, Rawson," he said venomously, "an' you savvy whose it is. Turn around and git outa here!"

Chapter II

BEEF DEAL—OR CATTLE STEAL

TRENT stood in the dust, eyeing the man in the saddle. "What was it you wanted?" he asked quietly, and then slid his gaze to Rawson's men who sat at ease in back of him and to the left, their whipped lean faces flat and bored.

"Payin' a friendly call," Rawson said, "if it's any of your business, stranger."

"You're on wrong ground," McNaffy whipped out angrily. "You're—"

"Take it easy-like, Gabe," Trent interrupted. Then, to Rawson: "I'm foreman here now. Light and talk."

"Jest a minute, Trent!" McNaffy swung around, distress, protest in every crease of his seamed face. "Yuh can't handle this hombre like he was folks. Why, damn it, man—"

Rawson's laugh cracked out across the yard. "Well, I'll be switched if I ever expected this! Where d'you hail from, stranger? You're a gent and a scholar, by Judas!"

Trent's face remained impassively stiff. "I asked you to light down and talk," he said.

Rawson's stare was blank. "What in blazes about?" he asked in a suddenly puzzled tone.

Trent spoke quietly though distinctly. "We just rode in from the creek a while ago, Rawson. I notice that you've got beef eatin' all over Diamond-C grass."

Rawson took his time about answering, and when he finally did, it was with a deep, cold antagonism. "Let it stay there," he said. There was no laughter left in him now, and suddenly he seized the horn and swung down to the ground to stand squarely in front of Trent and McNaffy and Bird. He was slimmer afoot than in the saddle, but even on the ground he had a blocky, muscular build.

"Listen, Trent—if that's your handle—I'm warnin' you not to make any trouble for me. I—"

"Of course," Trent said in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, "I know beef strays some, but come round-up a man usually drives his stuff back on his own range. Gabe tells me round-up's two weeks past. I been wonderin' why you ain't pulled off your cows."

"I don't usually have tuh explain what I do," Rawson snapped. "An' I ain't gonna start now." Anger was hot and dangerous in his greenish eyes. "The cows stay where they are till I git damned good an' ready to move 'em!"

"I was lookin' at that beef," Trent continued as though the wildcat rancher hadn't even spoken. "I saw plenty of Diamond-C cows down there with a vent mark on 'em and your brand underneath it. Now, if I ain't too nosey, Rawson, I—"

"Fella," Rawson sneered, "you ain't been in this country long, I kin see that." He reared back, placing his caloused hands deliberately on his gun belt, arrogance and scorn on his surly face. "An' I'm suggestin' the fool-killer's apt to git yuh, if yuh start pokin' your face into my business!"

"No offense intended," Trent said calmly. "I just—"

"That beef," Rawson cut in coldly, "happens to be legally mine, fella. Young Rob Conrad sold it to me 'fore he went in the Army."

"Hold on!" McNaffy blurted angrily. He swung his faded eyes on Trent and spoke with a plaintive urgency. "That's what's caused all the trouble here. That's how come Cass was plugged. There ain't an item on our books showin' Rob sold any stuff to Rawson. An' Rawson can't produce one damn sales slip to prove the deal!"

"Shut up, old man!" Rawson said threateningly. "I'm doin' the talkin' here." To Trent, he said, "I shot Cass in self-defense. He called me a rustler—an' I'll throw down on any other hombre that calls me one!"

A cynical grin played over Trent's thin mouth. "About them sales slips: I am plumb honin' to hear about them, Mister Rawson."

"I got that beef on *my* books," Rawson retorted. "I got sales slips to prove it, too, an' any hombre says I ain't—"

Trent was studying the man and making up his mind. He stopped the words on Rawson's lips with a quick, down-slapping statement. "I'll be over tomorrow . . . you can show me."

Rawson pulled back, his black brows creeping together. "Like hell yuh will!" Insolence etched itself on his dark face. "Yuh'll take my word fer it, Trent! Yuh'll take my word, or yuh can go pound salt!" He let his tight gaze range around the ranch yard, then brought it back to Trent. "This spread'll be part o' Big Bit in three months time like it should'a' been a-fore, if Cass hadn't bucked me." With the defiant words, he whipped himself around and swung back into the saddle and rode briskly out of the yard. His men neck-reined their own horses and followed him silently.

Gabe McNaffy watched them ride away, then turned slowly and faced Jim Trent. The old man was suffering. Trent's careful, almost deprecativ treatment of the man

who had killed Cass Conrad shocked and puzzled him; it tore at his loyalty to Virginia Conrad and to the ranch.

"Wa'al"—he blew out a hard breath, staring at the foreman out of puckered eyes—"I'll be a sonuva bob-tailed bull!"

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THEY buried Cass Conrad that afternoon in the county graveyard at Galena. Trent stood back discreetly from the grave while the preacher read the service. He noticed that Virginia seemed alone, too, and so it seemed natural for him to go to her and take her arm when it was over. It seemed natural for him to go into her house and sit with her later, in the dusk-shadowed living room.

When he sat down to breakfast with the girl next morning he was kind and considerate. She didn't ask him any questions about himself, and he was grateful to her for that. When the matter of wages came up, Trent respectfully suggested that he invest his small savings in the ranch, and this surprised her, and she looked at him across the table, two puzzled lines showing on her smooth forehead.

"But, Mister Trent, you hardly know me, and I—"

He reminded her dryly that if he had money tied up in Diamond-C he would naturally work harder to make the ranch pay again. She was not a helpless woman, he told her in his slow, soft voice, but she was weary and alone. She ought to sit back and let a man run things for her now. Virginia smiled, flushing a little under his level, flat-lidded gaze.

"All right," she said. "It's a bargain . . . Jim."

Trent spent that first day riding the nearby range, looking over the scattered bunches of red-speckled steers. The tally book told him that there should be close to a thousand head, not counting calves and cutbacks. Three hours in the saddle,

however, convinced him that even a careful count would show not more than five hundred grazing on the grama flats north of Bitter Creek. And McNaffy had informed him that the recent round-up had netted Diamond-C only about two hundred market beefs. It was plain in the face of this evidence that Mitch Rawson was cutting alarmingly into the Conrad herd, then claiming that Rob Conrad had sold the stuff to him in the past. Dead men, Rawson knew, could tell no tales.

Trent stayed on the home range for a week, making needed repairs, checking the stock and equipment. He did not ride to Big Bit as he threatened to do, much to the disgust of Gabe and Sam. Even Conchita, the fat Mexican cook, shook her paint-black head and said to Virginia, "I do not like eet, *sénorita*. Thees Trent hombre, ees he 'fraid of Rawson? *Dios*, if *Sénor* Rob was only—"

Trent rode down to town the end of that first week and signed a mid-season delivery contract with Fred Mott, the local beef-buyer. When Gabe McNaffy heard about it, he went to Trent and said, "Sufferin' catfish, Trent, we ain't got five hundred market cows! How yuh gonna deliver somethin' we ain't even counted?"

Trent grinned. "We can chouse a hundred or two outa the brush, old-timer. The rest Mitch Rawson's been holdin' for us."

McNaffy's mouth fell open and he forgot to close it. At last he managed to say, "Then you're gonna make a showdown with Rawson?" His tone was hopeful, yet disbelieving.

"I figure Big Bit'll be only too glad to turn back our stuff. We'll just wait a while and see," Trent said.

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ON TUESDAY of that week, Trent saddled up his roan and, without mentioning his destination to anyone, rode across Bitter Creek to Rawson's

ranch. Rawson was sitting out on the gallery of his gray house with Hoby Jenks, his foreman, and Bill Lankerwell, one of his hands. As Trent pulled up in front of the house, these three stood up, staring in astonishment.

Trent held in his horse and said, "Howdy." There were short, tough lines around his mouth."

Rawson shook a clenched fist. "Turn around and cut the breeze, Trent. I warned yuh not to come here."

"Keep your shirt on, Rawson," Trent said. "I'm just payin' back a friendly call."

"Pay no more." Rawson's mouth was a thin, trapped line. "You ain't wanted here. Not none."

Trent was at ease in the saddle, a tall, loosely-built man dressed in jeans and blue flannel shirt and a green-and-yellow neck-piece. He said, almost amiably, "About them there sales slips, Rawson—why don't you let me see 'em? Might end all the trouble here and now."

Cold suspicion crept into the rancher's expression. "Yuh must figure me fer a fool," he growled, "if yuh think I'd show my records to anybuddy but the courts."

Trent shook his head slowly. "I don't think you're a fool, friend. Not any. But I *have* been thinkin' about the courts. Like to save yourself a lawsuit, maybe?"

A crafty, narrow grin came to Rawson's stubbly face. "Oh, so that's your idee, huh? Hell, where'd you people git the dinero to sue me? That ain't free, yuh know."

Trent did not speak for a long moment. "Well," he finally said, "I'll lay my cards on the table. We're makin' a mid-season drive in a week from now, Rawson. There'll be quite a bunch of stuff movin' down to the loadin' pens; that's where the money's comin' from."

Rawson gave the other an iron-hard laugh. "Yuh can try, Trent, yuh can try."

Hoby Jenks, red-haired, gaunt, said to Rawson then, "Hell, Mitch, whyn't yuh

show them slips to him? Can't do no harm."

Rawson thought a moment, and Trent could almost read those thoughts as they stirred across his greenish eyes. Then, with a shrug, the outlaw whirled and entered his house. A moment later and he was in the yard, holding up a yellow slip for Trent to see.

Trent's face was a mask. He read that paper carefully, seeing that it bore the signature—or facsimile—of Rob Conrad! The transaction concerned two dozen head at twenty dollars per head. Trent stared suddenly at the man on the ground. He dropped his slow words on Rawson: "That slip's dated in August, three years ago. Rob Conrad was in Arizona then."

"Yeah?" Mitch Rawson was deliberate in his anger; his up-slanting gaze tightened on Trent's. "Yuh may savvy a lot, Trent," he said heavily, "but yuh don't savvy quite enough. Young Conrad was home on a furlough when he sold me that beef!"

Trent thought quickly. It was true that Rob had returned home on a furlough about three years ago. Rawson seemed to have his dates down pat. And now that Rob was dead there'd be no challenging the validity of his signature on this sales slip—and on all the others Rawson had doubtlessly forged for his own protection. Or, on the other hand, had Rob actually sold his father's cows without telling anyone about it? Knowing Rob as he did, Trent denied this possibility. And yet—

Trent was almost casual with his next words. "Well, Rawson, I reckon you win the first pot. Just the same, we'll let Judge Conners decide about them slips. Sorry I can't take your word—"

"You callin' me a rustler, too?" Rawson demanded thinly.

"We'll let the judge decide that, too," Trent said slowly, distinctly, "when the right time comes."

Rawson moved backward a pace and stopped; his face was twisted, his eyes

hot and bright. "Mebbe," he rapped out, "that time won't never come!"

The two men on the gallery moved to the rail, their hands poised preparedly above their guns. Rawson said, "Ride out! An' don't let me catch yuh within a mile of a cow bearin' my vent mark!"

"I sure hope," Trent said quietly, "you ain't lookin' for a private fight."

"Ride!"

Trent held his gaze on Rawson's contorted face for a long moment, and then he shrugged and turned his roan and drifted slowly out of the ward.

Chapter III

THE WAY OF A MAN WITH A GIRL

THAT night when Trent sat at dinner with Virginia, he said, "I been doin' some figurin', Virgie." He had been calling her that for several days now, and she didn't seem to mind. "This Rawson's not all bluff. He's got those slips—forgeries or not—and we can't touch that vented beef without bein' accused of rustlin'. Even though it *is* our own stuff."

It was nice, Virginia thought, to hear him say "our." It was good, too, to have him here, and there was something else that she scarcely dared admit, even to herself.

Conchita, the cook, had been the first to realize that romance had come to Diamond-C. When she had coyly spoken of it to Virginia a few days before, the girl had blushed to the edges of her dark hair, had laughed the suggestion off. But now—and she had to face it—maybe it was true.

Trent was saying in his slow, murmuring voice, "If it wasn't for you being here, Virgie, I'd ride over to Big Bit tomorrow and cut Rawson's herd for every cow with a vented brand on it."

Virginia looked at him with dark, expressive eyes. "You surely *are* a cautious man, Jim. That's what dad was planning on do-

ing when he—" She didn't finish, but bent her head suddenly away from him. Then: "Why *don't* you cut Rawson's herd?"

"Because they'd start unravelin' some cartridges, Virgie," Trent said seriously. "And I want to avoid that if I can. No call for any more shootin'—if we can manage things any other way."

"Well?"

Trent put his hands on the table, leaning over it. "I'm gonna take Gabe and Sam and haze every cedar-breaker out of the hills. There'll be some fat stuff out there—we can make up the rest from the creek herd and move at least three hundred down

with other ranchers and making friends.

There were times, riding home to the Diamond-C in the buckboard, when Trent wanted to hold her, and when it seemed she wanted to be held, but always the ghost of his lie stood between them. They seldom spoke of Rob—he avoided bringing up her dead brother's name, hadn't even attempted to since the time she had said with a fierceness that shocked him, "If I only knew who the coward was that deserted him, I'd spend the rest of my life paying him back!"

During those days when he didn't see her, Trent often made up his mind to tell

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to Mott at Galena in a week's time. Then we can take some of the money and bring Rawson to court next month."

She looked at him, growing trouble in her eyes. "Well, all right, Jim. That's okay with me, but—"

Trent said, "Sold. We'll start tomorrow, then."

* * *

Trent, McNaffy and Bird rode the brush for five days. By the night of the fifth, they had thrown a bunch of some hundred steers into the holding pen, just south of the ranchhouse. Cutting out enough to fill the trail herd would take two days longer; then they could start for Galena.

Evenings Trent spent with Virginia. He took her to town one night and to a *baile* at the Lazy Y the following night. He hadn't danced in a long time, and now it was fun. For a man of twenty-six he'd had very little of that commodity in his life so far. It was fun for Virginia, too, for she was meeting people again, talking shop

her the truth. Maybe she might understand and believe that he hadn't run out on Rob. But she was so bitter that he couldn't bring himself to tell her when he had the chance. And he hated himself for this weakness—if it was a weakness—and he didn't want to hurt her and he didn't want her to come to hate him, to drive him out of her life.

Finally he realized that his long silence would be a proof of his guilt in her eyes. He considered riding out without a word to anyone, but pushed that thought from his mind. That *would* be cowardly, and the truth was in him. Why should he continue to retreat from it? Yet, in spite of this reasoning, he continued to remain silent.

On Friday, two weeks after his arrival at the ranch, Virginia met him at the corals when he rode in from the hills with Gabe and Sam. She went to him as he dismounted and stood before him.

"I've been so worried, Jim. Two of Rawson's men have been hanging around here all day."

"Well," Trent said shortly, "why didn't you ride over to the Casey's and stay, or try and get word to me?"

"Hello," she said, "what's wrong, Jim? You sound as grumpy as an old she bear."

"Sorry," he answered in a gentler tone. "Just a bit proddy, I guess. Rawson's grabbed most of the really good stuff on the flats."

He didn't talk during supper. When Virginia went into the kitchen a little later, she said to the cook, "Something's going to happen. Jim didn't even finish his steak."

"*Si?*" Conchita Gomez showed her white teeth in a smile. "*Sénorita*, that hombre, he ees in loff. *Por Dios*, now that ees *bueno—mucho bueno!*"



AFTERWARD Virginia went out and sat in the swing with Trent. The desert moon rose above the ragged line of mountains to the east and shone bluely on the gallery. Trent suddenly threw away his cigarette and stood up and went to the steps and back, his hands locked behind him.

He stopped in front of the puzzled girl, then placed his big hands abruptly upon her shoulders.

"I've got to tell you something, Virgie," he said tensely, looking steadily down into her dark, up-lifted eyes. "But I don't savvy just how to start."

Her eyes lowered then, and she put her hands on his where they rested on her shoulders. His were cold, and then suddenly they grew warmer under hers. Trent stood there, a tall and taciturn shape in the moonlight, and then he pulled her up close against him and crushed his mouth on hers.

"Was—that what you wanted to say?" she whispered presently. "Because, if it was, darling, you said it very well."

"I want to marry you," he said thickly. "I—"

"Of course, Jim," she murmured against his shoulder. "I—want you to. When shall we—"

She never finished, for at that moment the hoarse voice of Gabe McNaffy lifted wildly from the direction of the horse corral. "Trent! Come a-runnin', fella! Somebuddy's gone an' stole all our damn hosses!"

Trent made the front yard in a dozen long-reaching strides. He had his gun out and was heading toward the sound of Gabe's frantically scuffing boots. But he halted suddenly, hearing the shrill yell of Sam Bird on the right in the direction of the cattle holding pen, now full of market steers.

"The beef's gone! Rawson's run off our beef!"

Trent cut across the yard and joined Gabe and Sam under the locust trees near the stable. The two old men had their guns swinging free as Trent rushed up. At the same instant, riders came boiling down into the yard from the ridge behind the house, and the steady, hard crashes of gunfire broke under the trees where Trent and the two hands stood. The pressure of those riders grew greater in the yard, and Trent, swinging around, counted at least eight horsemen as they went weaving back and forth between the stable and the house. The raiders had their coat collars turned up and bandannas tied across their mouths.

Bullets clipped the nearby trees. Trent heard them sing and chatter in the dust around him. He called, "Give it to 'em, boys!" and opened fire. Black, drifting shapes wheeled past the clump of trees and faded behind the house to reappear again on the other side.

Trent shouted, "Virgie! Get back!" But at the same instant he saw muzzle-flame spurt from the shadowed porch and knew that she was there, and in the fight! He

cursed and punched shots at the horsemen streaming by.

Rawson's men were in the yard and all around it now, vague wheeling shapes that hurled spears of gun-flame across the dust. They charged, then retreated, firing in sudden slamming rushes—charged again, then faded into the ink-black shadows behind the house. Somewhere in the house, Conchita Gomez screamed out her fear.

Then silence crashed down on the yard and the thunder of hoofs was a swiftly dying sound. The yard was empty, the smell of dust and powdersmoke the only reminder that this had not all been a dream. The stench of the guns clung to the sultry air minutes after Rawson and his men had vanished down the trail.

Trent found Virginia waiting on the porch, a rifle still gripped tightly in her hands; the barrel of it was hot to Jim Trent's touch.

"Good girl," he cried, then turned and raced toward the holding pen to the south of the house. McNaffy and Bird came up, breathing heavily, raspingly. "Beats me," Gabe panted, "how Rawson got the beef outa here without us hearin' him!"

Trent inspected the splintered rails of the corral. "Well," he remarked as he moved back toward the house, "we'll have to go over and borrow some horses 'fore we can do a thing." He entered the house after examining the horse corrals and finding nothing. He looked gaunt, and somehow grimly older and tired as he stood in the living room door. Virginia stood across the room in front of the fireplace. There was a man there at her side—a tall, wide-shouldered man, and he had his back turned toward the door. There was something vaguely familiar about that bulky form that stopped Trent in his tracks and made him think rapidly.

And then Virginia saw him and spoke; her voice was wildly happy now—almost hysterical. "Jim! He's not dead! He's back! Rob's come home!"

ROB CONRAD had known exactly how it would be when he came home. Puzzled by sounds of distant gunfire as he rode down the valley trail from the west, he had pushed all worry from his mind in his eagerness, and had ridden into the ranch yard, seeing nothing amiss, hearing no sound. And now he was home.

There was his sister, laughing and crying. She had incoherently tried to tell him what had happened a moment before, had managed to convey to him that a man called Jim Trent was here. And now, as he faced slowly around and stared, the man he had once admired—yes, loved—but for whom he now felt nothing but contempt, came toward him, a queer drawn look on his thin-boned face. Virginia had her head buried on Rob's shoulder, sobbing, laughing, until he tilted her chin and said, "Quit it, Sis."

Then she fought for composure and finally looked at Trent and said, "Rob, there he is. This is Jim Trent. He was in your regiment, too." Presently, she added, "Isn't it queer you two never met before?"

Rob Conrad held his tight blue gaze on Trent, biting his under lip to choke off the words that formed there. So Jim hadn't told her! His presence here was proof enough that he hadn't told her. Jim Trent had the gall of an elephant, all right!

"Massey's outfit was pretty big, Sis. Nothin' funny about us not meetin' afore," Rob said flatly. "Hey, Jim?"

Trent found his voice at last. "Yeah, that's right, Rob." His tone was hollow and strained, and he had lived a hundred years in the last five minutes. He hesitated, waiting grimly for Rob to offer his hand, but when the tall Texan merely stared, he moved forward and held out his own and said, "Everybody figured you was dead, Rob."

"Not yet." Rob gave a brittle laugh. "The Injuns shot me up a bit that day, but I vamoosed with my top hair and holed up

in the tall timber till things blew over."

He held out a bandaged right hand. "Sorry I can't shake hands with you. Be quite a spell 'fore I can use this flipper. Pardner o' mine done the Dutch act on me back there. Mebbe you heard about it. I'd've been home long ago, if it hadn't been for that hombre."

"Heard about it," Trent said meagerly.

"Made up my mind I wouldn't hunt for no harp yet a while," Rob said grimly. "I got me a little debt to pay 'fore I kick off."

"I savvy what you mean," Trent said.

Virginia's eyes were shining, excited and triumphant. "We both know. And I'll help you pay it. Who is he, Rob?"

"We gotta take care of Rawson first," Rob grinned. Then, to Trent: "Virgie's a little spitfire, Jim. Think I oughta take a chance and tell her who the hombre is?"

Trent's hazel eyes were steady, unwavering. There was an awful feeling inside of him at this moment and he fought to down it. "Go ahead," he said curtly. "Tell her if you want to."

Rob turned to the girl and threw an arm over her shoulder. "Sis, this here's a private job and I'll handle it alone. If I should need some help, though, why, I'll just call on Jim."

Trent stared vacantly at him. "Mean-in'," he murmured, "you ain't tellin' his name?"

"That's it, mister. I said it was private. Virgie'd just naturally gun-whup this hombre did I tell his name, and I don't hide behind no woman's petticoats."

A dull stain spread on Trent's face as he turned away. Virginia, calm at last, went into the kitchen to hustle the still terrified Conchita into throwing together a quick meal for her brother. Trent sat down in a chair and rolled up a cigarette with fingers that were not altogether steady. He said, "Rawson pulled a swift one tonight—and away with our trail herd."

Standing by the fireplace, Rob Conrad watched Trent with a sardonic grin. "They

got the horses, too, Virgie says. What was you doin' durin' the ruckus? Hidin'?"

Trent's jaw was rigid. He held his temper and said. "Ask Virgie?"

"Whyn't you get some horses and trail that skunk? He's prob'ly travelin' fast, but you could nail him 'fore mornin'."

"We'll wait till daylight. Tonight he'd have all the breaks."

"Same old careful Jim, ain't you," Rob taunted softly. "Only I got cause to remember you ain't careful. You're just plain—"

"All right," Trent exploded, "I don't have to take that!"

"Trent," Rob said contemptuously, "you're gonna take a lot more'n that 'fore I'm through with you."

Trent waited out the long moments, his mind hot and cold by turns. Finally, when he could trust himself to speak, he said, "Mitch Rawson's got a bunch of sales slips bearin' your signature. Ever sell him any Diamond-C beef?"

Rob Conrad blew out a long breath. "So that's what the dirty polecat's been up to? No, I never had any dealin's with Big Bit—until now. There'll be a-plenty from now on, though!"

While Rob Conrad ate the food prepared by the Mexican cook, he watched Trent and Virginia with a hard care. And he saw how proud the girl was of this man whom he despised. There was patently more than just ordinary friendship between these two.



LATER in the evening, Rob rode his sorrel down the trail, locating the Diamond-C cavvy on the flats where Rawson had stampeded them before the raid. When the Texan returned to the ranch he met Trent waiting for him at the corrals. Rob glanced around to make sure they were alone. "All right, mister," he said, "start talkin' fast. Why didn't you tell Virgie who you were?"

Trent remained a stiff shape in front of his accuser. "Why didn't *you* tell her back there in the house? One word outa you would'a' spilled the whole thing."

Rob made a quick, impatient gesture. "And be to blame for breakin' her heart? Trent, you must be a fool as well as a coward! If I'd'a' done that, she'd never have forgiven me for wreckin' her life. I'm gonna handle this a different way, Trent. I'm gonna prove to Virgie that you're yella. There ain't never been a dog in the Conrad fam'ly, but if she wants to marry one with her eyes open, well, that's her business. And if she does that, that's where I fade out—for keeps!"

Trent said, "Hard words, Rob. I'd been hopin' you'd see the truth. Trouble is, you been stewin' in your own juice so long, nothin' I could say would make any difference."

"You're durned tootin', mister!"

"I came here," Trent went on stubbornly, "to tell your father, but Rawson shot him 'fore I had the chance."

"Why didn't you tell Virgie, then?"

"She had all the troubles in the world on her shoulders, the day I rode in. I put it off—and then it was too late. I—I fell in love with her, and—"

Rob cut in, "You was playin' the game both ways against the middle, mister."

"I saw no reason for destroyin' something pretty grand," Trent came back in a flat, hard voice. "Besides, I thought you was dead."

"Yeah," Rob laughed. "You'd've married her and gone on lettin' her think you was a man!"

Trent took the insult without even the quiver of a lash. "That day back at Ketterman," he said finally, "I allowed my feelin's for you to get the better of my brains. I sent O'Brien ahead to warn the post and rode back lookin' for you. You know what happened to O'Brien, and you know what happened to me."

"That's *your* story," Rob sneered. "Why, even the papers knew how you run out on me! Why didn't you do something about them news stories?"

"An hombre," Trent said heavily, "don't us'ally go 'round braggin' about bein' cashiered outa the Army."

"Listen," Rob said coldly. "I'm gonna tell Virgie the man that pulled out on me wasn't usin' his right name—which you wasn't—and I'm gonna tell her I don't know his real name or where he went. That'll satisfy her. But, by George Johnson, I'll see she finds out what kind of an hombre you are before she marries you!"

Rob Conrad was determined to prove Trent a coward, and he felt sure the opportunity would come to show Jim Trent up in his true colors. That opportunity came quicker than he expected!

They were at breakfast when Trent announced, "I'm ridin' to town for a warrant."

Rob looked over the rim of his coffee cup. "A warrant? What in hell for?"

"For Mitch Rawson. We'll handle this thing accordin' to law."

Rob Conrad laughed. "And give that *orejana* a chance to cover his trail? Trent, you must be loco!"

"Maybe you got some ideas," Trent said stiffly.

"You bet I have," Rob declared in a lower tone. "I'm takin' charge here, and I'm sendin' Gabe and Sam down to watch Big Bit while I scout this country for our beef."

Trent protested. "You can't send a couple of old men out on a job like that. Rawson would gun the both of 'em down without battin' an eye!"

"Why don't *you* do it, then," Rob suggested casually. "You're one o' the owners and oughta be willin' to take a little risk. Hell, you're the first cowman I ever met that'd let a rustler run off his stuff without puttin' up a fight!"

Virginia spoke from across the table.

"I'm glad you're careful, Jim. Rob is so—hot-headed. He doesn't ever count the cost of anything he does. He's not afraid of—anything."

Trent realized that she didn't mean it the way it sounded. Nevertheless, a red stain climbed slowly up around his ears as he stood up and said, "The hombre that takes unnecessary risks is a plain damn fool in my lingo!"

Rob stood up and the two men eyed each other with a blinding rage. Rob said, "I'm gonna find that beef, whether you come along or not! And when I do, I aim to shoot it out with Rawson, gun to gun!"

There was a tense silence in the room. And then Trent shrugged and moved away from the table. "I'll ride with you," he said shortly. "No tellin' what kind of a jackpot you'll get in, if you go alone."



THE sun was swinging up over the hills as Trent and Rob rode across the ford at Bitter Creek and headed into Rawson's range. Trent sat saddle, staring straight ahead, not speaking. Rob seemed in high spirits, the danger signal, as Trent well knew. They entered the timber on the east line of Big Bit and swung in a wide circle, scouting the draws and canyons for the stolen herd. Now Trent's gaze traveled to right and left, searching the rough terrain for sign of other riders.

Rob said, "I'm gonna have a look-see over yonder behind them rocks. There's a thousand places in these hills where Rawson could stache them steers."

"Better circle," Trent advised. "Never pays to ride head-first into rough country like this."

The Texan grinned his mockery at Trent. "Go ahead and circle," he flung out. "I'm ridin' in. Head-on's as good as any way to fight!"

They went up-grade and passed through a stand of pine and came out in a shallow

valley, whereupon, Trent started to bear off to the left, seeking thicker cover. It was at this moment that five horsemen bulged suddenly out from behind a long reach of rimrock and halted a hundred feet away.

Mitch Rawson, Trent saw instantly, was one of those riders. The wildcat rancher sat slantways in his saddle, utterly at ease, his swarthy face twisted by a dry and mocking grin. Hoby Jenks, his red-haired foreman bulked on the outlaw's left, with Bill Lankerwell on the right. The other two Trent did not know, but he saw the deadly creep of recklessness, the tight expectancy on their long, lean faces.

Trent and Rob pulled up abruptly, and Rob's eyes blazed with a sudden joy. Rawson looked at him and said, "Howdy, Conrad. Heard in town you was back. Everybody figured yuh was plumb dead out in Arizona."

Rob Conrad answered him in a tone that was both soft and dangerous. "I'm gonna throw down on you, Rawson. This here's as good a day as any for you to die." Rob's left hand lay flat against his thigh, but a ripple of iron muscles showed under his flannel shirt.

Rawson remained a thoroughly relaxed shape in the saddle. He did not stir from that position, but when he spoke it was through tight-trapped lips.

"Conrad, stand fast! You, Trent, hold your hand away from your gun! Now, turn around, the both of yuh! Start shaggin'!"

Hoby Jenks threw his soft words at Rawson then. "Better unbuckle their guns first, boss."

Not a man here made a move; they were like statues carved from solid rock. The tension grew, and then Rawson said, "Good idee, Hoby. All right, you two, put up your hands. Then ride over here. You, too, Trent." The taunting grin was back on his face again. "If you boys ain't off my grass in half an hour, there'll be a pair o' rustlers jerkin' on a rope with the buzzards pickin' out their eyes."

Chapter IV

CODE OF THE CONRADS

JIM TRENT sat motionless; he had his hands locked around the horn of his high, wide-skirted saddle. His legs were pushed down straight in the stirrups, his shoulders slightly rounded and pitched forward. Rob Conrad sat a yard away on his right, a tense and blocky shape on his sorrel mare. Trent swung his flat-lidded gaze on the Texan and said, "Let's pull out, Rod—they've got us dead to rights."

Rawson spoke. "Come over here, I said!"

At that clipped command Rob Conrad made his lightning draw. One moment his gun was nested in the leather, the next it was flashing fire. But the draw was too quick, it was hampered by the unaccustomed left-hand pull. The bullet went wide of Rawson's high-bulking frame. Instantly the air was boiling with blazing guns. Bullets screamed across the bowl.

Hoby Jenks's horse screamed out its unexpected pain and stumbled to its knees, hurling the foreman headlong to the dust. He hit on his shoulders and rolled on, over and over, until he piled up against a jagged rock.

Trent whipped sideways in the saddle, pulling his gun and firing at the shifting shapes before him. He saw Rob Conrad falling back, firing as he went, and he jerked his own horse around and swung the spurs back hard. Gun thunder rolled back and forth across the hills.

Seeing Rob vanish in the timber on the left, Trent lay over the horn, throwing steel to his roan. Behind him Rawson's men quit firing suddenly. After that, Trent pushed for the ford. Minutes later, he reached the creek and stopped. Rob Conrad was racing in from the left, hatless, his blue eyes blazing. Trent turned in the saddle, viewing the land behind him. There was no sign of Big Bit there. Then he swung on Rob.

"You damned loco fool!" he shouted. "They could'a' killed the two of us!"

They reached Diamond-C an hour later. Rob Conrad was in a reckless mood, had taunted Trent continuously during the ride up from Bitter Creek. Trent's face was grim, his mouth a wire-thin line as he took the Texan's contemptuous heckling. But he did not speak, just ignored Rob Conrad as though he wasn't there.

Late in the afternoon, in the saddle again, and with Gabe McNaffy and Sam Bird bringing up the rear, they turned down across the grama flats and pointed their horses for Bitter Creek once more. Now riding in silence, they passed Diamond-C beef, Big Bit steers, and cattle with Rawson's vent brand showing freshly on their reddish hides.

They rode swiftly along this flat and rolling country, with the creek now on the right and the pine hills a matter of two or three miles ahead. They hit the trail of a sizeable bunch of steers finally and the hoof prints of six or eight escorting riders. Trent dropped his grim comment: "If that's our trail herd—and I think it is—they won't be far ahead."

But a half mile farther on, Trent saw that the beef had been drifted off to the right, deeper into Rawson's hills. The trail cut sharply between a stand of pine and a high ridge, barren except for a thicket of greasewood on its crest. Gabe and Sam pushed forward to ride with Trent. Rob held his sorrel steadily out in front; his big frame seemed synchronized with the gait of his loping sorrel.

"Better keep yore eye peeled, Trent," McNaffy warned. "It was right near here that pore ol' Cass was killed."

And then they came to higher ground. Breaking suddenly out of the timber, they saw a meadow lying steeply on the descending hillside in which grazed several hundred head of beef. Farther out on this almost hidden prairie were more cattle—the grass

was black with them, the setting sun glittering on their wide, up-swept horns. The nearby cows, Trent saw at a glance, belonged to Diamond-C. There was no doubt of it; even in the failing light he could read their brand.



SAM BIRD halted with the rest and voiced his candid astonishment, "Why, the brass-faced bullet-biter! Damned if he ain't got our stuff right here! An' this must be where he vents the cows, right under our damn nose!"

"Well," Trent said quietly, "we'll see about this now."

All of them knew what he meant, and Rob Conrad shot him a queer, penetrating glance. Each man looked with suspicion upon the timber surrounding this meadow. But Rob Conrad did not. The Texan put steel to his sorrel and trotted it straight toward the grazing herd. Trent called out sharply, "Wait, Rob!" but the Texan merely waved indifferently and continued on. Trent wore a frown as he touched up his roan and followed at a more cautious pace. McNaffy and Bird swung after him.

They caught up with Rob a moment later. Trent said angrily, "Feelin' stout again, ain't you, Rob? Well, take it easy. There's others here besides yourself."

The Texan turned in the saddle and gave Trent a jeering laugh. "I savvy, mister," he said. Then, to Gabe and Sam: "Come on, you rannies, let's move this stuff for home."

Trent started to object, then shrugged and said, "Okay, but take it easy, will you, Rob. It'll be dark in an hour now."

They circled the meadow, raising dust and racket out of the knee-high grass. The uproar of the cows and this dust, Trent realized, would be a clear signal to Rawson and his men if they were within two miles of here. Trent heard Rob Conrad yipping at the beef and swore angrily, and turned

in and out among the slowly moving cattle, spotting the Diamond-C brand and the vent mark with a Big Bit burned beneath it.

Trent's roan cut these steers out and pushed them on ahead. Minutes passed and nothing happened. Trent felt a tentative surge of relief. If they could only get this herd down and across Bitter Creek on Diamond-C grass he would feel better. There they could make a stand if necessary, and later, when the courts had decided the case, they could ride back and comb Rawson's range for the rest of the stolen cows.

Just as dusk closed in, they came in sight of the creek, a silver streak on the plain with the pale light of the moon on it. Rob Conrad was riding point; Sam Bird had the swing, and McNaffy had the drag with Trent. The old cowhand was sweating steadily; his face had the shine of polished leather in this light. His keen eyes continually searched the horizon. And so it was Gabe who suddenly spotted something the other had not seen. He pointed to the east with a rigidly outflung hand.

"Here they come, boys! Here comes Big Bit!"

There was a heavy cloud of dust out there to the east, against the drab gray sky. The rolling hills were still colored by the last rays of the setting sun, and it was against that slatey background that Trent suddenly made out a wedge-shaped group of riders sweeping forward over the rough terrain. Rob Conrad saw them at the same moment and let out a warning yell and galloped back from his position at the point.

Trent barked out an order, and the others quickly threw the cattle into a milling mass. The herd was bunched in a shallow cup of hills when Mitch Rawson and his men hit them. Excitement whetted Trent's nerves as he sat there hearing Rawson's hoarse command, "Come on, boys!"

Darkness came down. Only the cloud-screened moon gave needed light; a voice—Sam Bird's—sang out loud and urgent: "Trent! Watch out behind yuh!"

McNaffy's yell lifted at once: "Hit fer the rocks back here!"

Twenty feet behind Trent, a dozen haystack boulders bulked against the slope. Trent, turning in the saddle, punched three shots at the oncoming Big Bit. Then he rode into this natural rock fort and swung down. The others joined him, dropping from the saddle, pistols and rifles ready. McNaffy's old buffalo gun gleamed and the breechblock clattered as he loaded it against his ribs. Trent drew his revolver and moved out cautiously in front of one of those huge rocks.

Big Bit now was drifting in closer and a man yelled, "Give 'em hell!"



MITCH RAWSON and his men now were only a hundred yards away and breaking into a driving run that carried them around the edge of the milling herd.

The beef, milling between the rocks and Rawson's outfit, drifted aside as though pushed by a giant hand, and Big Bit came up with a rush, then veered off to fade away in the hemming shadows to right and left. Their sixguns rolled.

McNaffy grunted out an oath and fired his piece again, then retreated toward the rocks. Trent, waiting a definite target, saw one rider whip around the far edge of the beef. He lifted his gun and let go with one shot and saw the rider fling away his rifle and fall headlong.

Rob Conrad's six-shooter was hammering out its song of death as he slammed lead into the ranks of the circling riders; the explosions of his gun were as steady and measured as though the big Texan was counting as he fired. But Rob was not behind the shelter of the rocks—he was hunkered down ten feet in front of them, on Trent's left.

One of Rawson's rowdies plunged suddenly out of the smoke and din and bore

straight down on the low-crouching form of Rob Conrad. Trent laid a shot on this man. He hit the rider's horse and watched it sink; he saw the rider free himself from the stirrups and seem to flatten out against the earth.

Trent called out a warning and sprang up and ran forward, trying to keep that man's shadow within his sight as the outlaw drifted along the ground. A shot exploded in Trent's face as he crept forward—another cracked out of the blackness almost at his feet. Rob Conrad dropped his sixgun and lurched upright, swaying on his feet. He stood that way, a black shape against the sky, and then he dropped.

Trent had the outlaw spotted now and he hit him with his first shot. A horse reared by, riderless and confused, and Trent vaguely recognized Mitch Rawson's paint. Trent heard the steady crashes of gunfire, heard the shouts and cursing of Bird and McNaffy back of him, and he bent quickly over the still form of Rob Conrad.

He said, "Rob—Rob!" and felt lead howl past him to hit the slope.

The Texan stirred and groaned, "Get back, Jim! I'm done!"

Trent emptied his gun at the wheeling shapes of Rawson's men, then lifted Rob Conrad in his arms and half carried him, half dragged him back to the protection of the rocks. And he was seeing this mad confusion, and he was smelling the smoke and the dust and hearing the wild yells of the Big Bit crew. And now a cold and deadly fury swept Jim Trent. He left the man who had been his friend and hurled himself into the heart of the fight.

For the next few wild, roaring minutes he put Rob Conrad out of his mind. He slammed lead at Rawson's men, firing, reloading, firing again. It was a crazy and savage dogfight, with the panicked bawling of the steers adding to the rising din.

Bullets smashed around Trent but he ignored them. Rawson's raiders were running wide now, beaten back by the fury of

the Diamond-C attack. And now they were afoot, firing as they made one last reckless charge against the cowmen forted in the rocks. But Trent's lead broke them out of their tracks again and again and presently they were fading back, streaming up on their frightened horses.

Trent, stunned by the sudden silence, heard hoofs clatter away in a diminishing cone of sound. Standing slack and suddenly weary there in the open, Trent knew that this night's fight was done, and he knew that Big Bit had been smashed.

Gabe McNaffy, smoking rifle still held ready, came out from the rocks and bent curiously over a man in the cup. And then he turned to Trent and said, "It's Rob, Jim. The rest don't count."

Trent put away his gun and turned and walked slowly toward the silent form of Rob Conrad on the ground. He did not speak again that night, and it was Trent, stiff-faced and still, who later entered the ranchhouse with Rob Conrad in his arms.

THE yard at Diamond-C was packed with rigs and ranch wagons. Saddle horses stood rank on rank under the locust trees. Men's voices, restrained and low, made a murmurous rumble in the morning's sultry air. Doc Abernathy had just announced that Rob Conrad would live.

The doc was grinning as he faced Trent

and Virginia in the quiet living room. "Don't savvy how come, but yuh can't seem to kill a man as tough as Rob. He's goin' to pull through okay, by grabs!" The medico fumbled in his black bag and handed Trent a bottle of pills. "Didn't give him any o' these yet, Jim, 'cause I kinda figured you and Virgie might wanta say hello to him. These'll make him sleep, which is what he needs most now."

When they were alone, Trent looked at the girl and smiled for the first time in twelve hours. He motioned toward the door of Rob Conrad's room and said, "You go first, Virgie. Just tell him I'm all right."

A moment later Virginia came back and went to Trent, putting her hands on his shoulders. Her violet eyes were a little puzzled.

"He's out of his head, Jim," she whispered. "All he does is mumble things. He said to tell you he knew of only one other man who could fight the way you did last night. A man he called 'Sarge', and he said he double-crossed this man in Arizona. He said to ask you if you knew this man, and what happened to him."

Trent looked steadily into the girl's upraised eyes and said, "Never heard of him, Virgie." Then, placing the bottle in her hand: "Better give him some of these now. Rob's a little off his head, all right." He gave her a wry, hard grin. "But he'll get over it."

THE END



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It put troops of night-riders on the prairies armed with six-shooters and wire-cutters.



Boom Market for Death

Three Yankee inventors wrote their names deep in the heart of the West—in sweat and tears and red pioneer blood!

By HARRY VAN DEMARK

THREE Yankee inventions won the Great Western Plains from the Indians, gave them to the ranchers and cowboys and took them away again.

Samuel Colt of Connecticut patented his

six-shooter in 1836, organized a company, sent a consignment of the new weapons to Texas. Almost immediately the Texas Rangers started in to make the firearm famous, a job the cowboy later took up and

carried on until the Colt single-action .45 became as much a part of a Westerner's raiment as his ten-gallon hat.

The sixgun became the favored hand-arm of the man on horseback, drove the Indian from the plains and put him on reservations. Then the cattlemen moved in and began their everlasting—and often discouraging—search for water.

Again Yankee ingenuity came to their rescue. Daniel Halladay, a young mechanic in Ellington, Connecticut, met his friend, John Burnham, who had gone West, then returned East for a visit. Burnham had become known in the plains country as a pump doctor, because he "had a way" with water pumps.

"What they need out on the prairies is a self-governing windmill," Burnham told young Halladay. "One power they've got a lot of out there is wind."

So Dan Halladay got busy, turned the clumsy arms of the old-world windmill into small, metal blades, gave it a tail to hold it into the wind, put on a governing weight that would rise slowly with the force of the wind and keep the machine from running away with itself.

Of course the windmill, increasing the number of water-holes as it did, was more a maker of peace than a fomentor of ructions. But when the third Yankee invention came along it set the sixguns to blazing, arrayed class against class, and littered the plains with dead and dying. Also, it made the bread basket of the nation.

In the year 1873, Joseph Farwell Glidden of New Hampshire, who had settled in Illinois, where he had become a leading farmer and also the sheriff of De Kalb County, took two long pieces of ordinary wire and a lot of short pieces, sharp on the ends, twisted the long strands together and stuck in a short piece crossways every foot or so.

Joseph Glidden got his patent in 1874, called his product barbed wire. It was prickly stuff to handle, prickly on the hands and on human tempers. It set neighbors to

calling each other hard names, and before long it put troops of night-riders on the prairies armed with six-shooters and wire-cutters, set rifles to cracking, started some of the biggest patent suits the country had ever seen, and set up a mammoth industry. Also it gave the West a fence that cattle, once pricked by its sharp barbs, would not try to break through.

Yes, barbed wire caused a lot of trouble. But it also fenced sections, quarter sections and small farms, made it possible for the hated nesters, who were eventually to be the backbone of the West, to raise crops on the deep prairie loam, safe from molestation by roving herds of cattle. Whether the farmers should fence in their crops, or the cattlemen fence in their herds, was long a point of antagonism on the plains.

Out of Worcester, Massachusetts, from the plant of the American Steel & Wire Company, rolled solid trainloads of the new fencing material. Only 10,000 pounds were manufactured in the first year, 1874. The next year sixty times that much rolled West. In 1880 over 80,000,000 pounds was produced and sold.

All of which meant trouble. But not for Joe Glidden. He sold his patents, got out from under and let the manufacturers fight the almost endless string of lawsuits brought by those who claimed to have made barbed wire before the Illinois Yankee did.

The little cattlemen, however, who saw the free range disappearing, while tremendous acreage went inside fences, did not go to law. They took things into their own hands, went out under cover of night and cut wire.

It didn't make so much difference to the big ranchers. They bought full trainloads of barbed wire, fenced in mammoth acreages, including their own land, the government's and even that homesteaded by the nesters. They fenced in range and water, and thus got away from the necessity of spring and fall roundups, which always had been costly affairs.

According to the records, Colonel W. H. Day of Coleman County, Texas, was the first of the big ranchers to make up his mind that the days of the free range were nearing their end. In 1881 he ordered wire from the East and set his cowboys to putting in posts. The colonel had no intention of fencing his entire ranch. Only his pasture. But pastures in Texas were something to marvel at. This one of Colonel Day's was 7,000 acres, over ten miles square.

Ever after it was known as the Red Wire Pasture. Red it was, too, with the blood of warring factions. With the blood of cattle herds purposely stampeded against the sharp spikes of the barbed wire.



H. R. STARKWEATHER, a neighbor of Colonel Day's, also the owner of great herds, decided to profit by Day's example and fence in a bit of land for himself. Starkweather, however, was short of cash. It took good, hard money to buy barbed wire. He went to Chicago to make financial arrangements.

One morning he was leaving his hotel to go down and sign the papers and get the cash, when he happened to glance at a morning newspaper. A headline nearly knocked his eye out. "HELL BREAKS LOOSE IN TEXAS," the caption read. "Fence-cutters Get Fifty Miles in Coleman County."

The news item may have stretched the mileage a bit, but the story disclosed that a full ten miles—one complete side of Colonel Day's brand new four-strand fence—had been cut between every post. Even worse for Starkweather, the bankers had seen the story. The Texan went home without the money.

When he got there he was just as happy as though he had brought home the bacon. For he found that keeping up a barbed wire fence in Texas was no proposition for a man

with limited capital. Colonel Day had decided upon fencing, and fence he would, he declared, and let the fence-cutters beware.

Then began the year-long war that gave the Red Wire Pasture its name. Day brought in two ex-Rangers, Wood Saunders and Walter Durbin, loaded them down with firearms, made them the head of his fighting men. He restrung his wire and installed a night patrol.

The very first night the new wire was up there was blood along the fence. Lee Ring and Austin Sparks, two of Day's riders, were on duty. They left their horses in a hollow, hobbled on their high heels along the wires, stopping every few minutes to listen.

Suddenly they heard the unmistakable *zing* of a tight wire snapping. Almost down on their bellies, they crawled forward, rifles ready, sixguns loose in their holsters. Soon they heard the low murmur of voices. Moving, busy bodies loomed up in the murk. Then the two cowboys made their big mistake.

"Stick up your hands!" yelled Ring as he and Sparks rose up with leveled rifles.

But the fence-cutters weren't sticking their hands up. Instantly they dropped to the ground, opened a withering fire in the direction of the challenging voice. Ring was killed at the first blast. Sparks was shot through the right shoulder.

That was the opening engagement of the Red Wire Pasture war, that extended over a period of twelve months.

The Red Wire War ended only when the cutters, grown bold, started cutting in broad daylight. Then the ex-Rangers, Saunders and Durbin, knew it was only a question of time.

Under cover of night Day's men built themselves a little fort, near a point of the fence far from the ranchhouse where the terrain was rough. At this point an old cattle trail that led to water had been cut off by the wire.

The stoppage of these old trails was one,

of the prime complaints of the small cattle owners. They would cut fences at such points wherever and whenever they encountered them. So the two fighting men knew it was only a question of time before the cutters would come within range of their hidden fort.

The first day and night of their wait passed without incident. But just after dawn the second day they saw four riders approaching.

"Drop your artillery and turn your backs to us!" Saunders shouted.

There was nothing else to do. The fence-cutters could see nothing to shoot at, but they could see the muzzles of two rifles covering them.

Reluctantly they refrained from jumping for their rifles, unloosed their cartridge belts and let their weapons fall to the ground.

The county judge of Coleman County sent them to the penitentiary, as wire-cutting had been made a felony by the State Legislature, and that stopped the war.

What manner of men were these who fought against great odds, determined that barbed wire should not destroy the free range?

Texas Ranger Sergeant Ira Aten, in one of his letters to Ranger headquarters described the ilk: "These fence-cutters are a hard lot. When they suspicion us they will no doubt try and murder us, but we will be in at the killing. . . . The cutters here are what I call cowboys, or small men, that own from fifteen head all the way up to 200 head of cattle and a few cow ponies.

"Some have 100 acres of land, some more and some not so much. . . . They hate the grangers, as they call the farmers, and they hate the cattlemen who fence their pastures and water. In fact, they hate anybody who will fence land either for farming or for pasture. They are a hard lot of men in here and they are thieves as well as fence-cutters. Most of them are villains of the deepest dye and death would be too good for them."



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SCALPS for the GENERAL

By W. F. BRAGG

A starvation battalion of blue-clad men moved doggedly forward over a hell of sand, vowing to God they'd break the might of the Sioux Nation if once they got the chance. For how could they know that moving with them was Treachery and Death—disguised as friend and fighting mate?

WHEN old Grampa Sikes, the Powder River buffalo killer, reported to Provost Sergeant Riley, of Crook's command, that John Bear Foot, the Shoshone Indian hunter, had disappeared with three wooden cases of fifty-caliber ammunition, Joe Conway's first angry thought was of sugar. An irrelevant thought, indeed, since just then the soldiers of three cavalry regiments were making a forced march toward the Black Hills and eating their played-out horses and mules to ward off starvation.

Grampa made his charge against Bear Foot to the little group of troopers and frontiersmen gathered around a hole in the muddy yellow gumbo where, the night before, Sergeant Riley had buried the cartridges to prevent them from falling into the hands of roving Sioux braves. The hoofprints of unshod Indian ponies proved the hostiles had looted the cache. But what pointed Grampa's argument was the mark of a huge human foot deeply imbedded in the muck, the mark of the foot that had given John his name among the Indians.



Joe forced up the carbine and fired.

"Since Bear Foot learned from his pardner Conway," Grampa drawled, pawing his brindle-gray beard, "that green paper with pitchers on it passes for money among palefaces, he'll go any route for a dirty dollar. Even to sellin' shells to the Sioux who'll often give as high as one buff'ler robe for three ca'tridges."

Tall Joe Conway reached out and seized the end of Grampa's foot-long beard.

"You damned old cheat!" he snarled. "The likes of you—who cheated soldiers outa hard-earned pay with a lump of doctored sugar in a fly loo game—the likes of you callin' my pardner a renegade! Hell, didn't the Sioux kill John's brother and hang his quarters to a cottonwood tree over in the Big Horn? John hates the Sioux like all the Shoshones do. Naw, I'd sooner think that you sold this ammunition to the hostiles, and somehow put the blame for the deal on old John."

Anton Honda flipped back the front of his worn buffalo hide coat with deft hands, swung up the sawed-off shotgun which was slung by a buckskin strap from his right shoulder. Anton was lean as a rattlesnake just out of its winter den. And as vicious.

"No keel my fran!" Anton hissed, coal-black eyes gleaming under heavy black brows. "Turn heem loose. Queeck!" Anton pressed the barrels of his weapon against Joe's short ribs.

Before Joe could free Grampa—or reach for the haft of his holstered knife—the old buffalo hunter spoke mildly.

"Anton," he commanded, turning his tan-colored eyes on his henchman, "don't make these brave soldiers think we're a couple of trouble-makin' ranihans. Like Conway and his Injun pard. Show 'em we're mild as milk, just tryin' to help. Put up your gun! The army kin kill its own skunks."

Red-faced Sergeant Riley, lean as a hound around the belt line since he was a veteran cavalryman and therefore hated to eat horse meat, stepped briskly between Joe and the shotgun.

"The army can indade kill its own skunks," he said. Then, to his followers, Privates Smith and Pulaski of the provost guard:

"Disarm Conway! Put him under arrest!"

Releasing his clutch on Grampa's beard, Joe stepped away from the hole dug in the greasy gumbo where the argument had arisen. He carried a Colt six-shooter and a knife in his belt, and a Henry magazine rifle in the crook of his arm. There were five men against him but he reckoned he could cut off a couple before they beefed him. His fierce pride galled him to go to the smoke. But if they dropped him here, he'd lose his chance to prove his Indian friend, John Bear Foot, was not a traitor to the whites who had paid him and fed him during General Crook's summer campaign.



ALL around him, as he stood there, rolled the bleak prairie ranges four slow marches south of the head of Heart River. Streamers of fog, rising and falling, first revealed then hid the sharp outlines of buttes with which the land abounded. Off to the rear could be seen the dark files of horsemen of Crook's three mounted regiments, footing it slowly through the mud toward Deadwood in the Black Hills, butchering beloved horses for meat when the poor brutes surrendered to starvation and fatigue.

Nearby waited the relief party of one hundred and fifty troopers, packers and scouts, drawn from the command together with six mule pack trains. Crook had ordered these men to head swiftly for Deadwood, over fifty miles to the south, take on needed supplies and then hurry back to the main and starving command. And he'd made the relief party strong enough to fight any band of hostile Sioux that dared to bar its trail.

It ran against all the frontier-trained instincts of young Joe Conway to put up his hands in surrender. Men who pitted their skill and courage against the dangers of the high western mountains and limitless buffalo plains believed that surrender meant death. And, if not that, the greater disgrace of losing standing among their fellows.

But Joe believed his partner had been lured into some trap, that he still lived, and that only by surrender now would the chance arise later to rescue him from the Sioux and prove old Grampa and Anton Honda were liars.

As Privates Smith and Pulaski hesitated to obey Riley's order—since both troopers had ridden knee to knee with Conway on many a game hunt during the campaign—Joe grasped his Henry rifle by the small of the stock and handed it over.

"Don't aim to let it drop in the mud, boys!" he drawled. "One of you had better come over an' unbuckle my belt. Gob of gumbo in the muzzle of a gun might raise hell with a man if he had to start shootin' in a hurry."

Disarmed, he stood there, a lonely figure surveyed by hostile eyes, wind fluttering his greasy buckskin shirt, his patched pants cut from a Hudson Bay blanket and stuffed into the tops of his moccasins.

Only old Grampa's squirrel-like eyes twinkled. And he murmured softly, "*Sugar!*" And, hearing that, even Anton Honda's dark, hatchet-sharp face broke into a grin.

But Sergeant Riley turned on them. "Shut up!" he barked. "But for the moccasin tracks left here so plain by Bear Foot, I'd believe, with Conway, the likes of you would sooner dig up this ammunition and sell it to the Sioux. Conway showed you up plain as a couple of cheats when you got the boys to playin' fly loo when we had plenty rations with the command. And it was Bear Foot who tipped him off as to how you kept the flies from lightin' on your lump of sugar."

Grampa shook his head reprovingly. "I'm mild as milk," he insisted. "It was but a joke to make life merrier for the brave soldiers. I gave back all the money me an' Anton had won. I'd have done it sooner if Conway hadn't butted in with his fool talk about me rubbin' wild carrot juice on my lump of sugar so the flies wouldn't light there."

Riley said disgustedly, "To hell with fly loo! We're ready to march for Deadwood. We can't afford to take no chances. Or three regiments are apt to eat *all* their hosses. So—Conway goes under arrest until we get to Deadwood where we can throw him outa the service."



NIGHT was falling swiftly as the relief party swung away from the camp and took the southern way toward the Black Hills. Orders came down from Captain Mills, the column commander, to take every precaution since the range was known to be alive with hostile Sioux bands. Even the bells of the mule trains were muffled and campaign-hardened troopers tied down sabres and carbines to prevent the clanking of metal as they moved slowly through the foggy night.

Riding glumly with Privates Smith and Pulaski, Joe heard the two troopers chuckling grimly over the order that no matches be lit.

"And three regiments outa tobacco for days," laughed Smith, a small turkey-necked New Englander.

"Von can smoke coffee in de pipe," grunted Pulaski, a middle-aged veteran who had served with Sheridan's cavalry in the south ten years before, "if dere *is* any coffee."

"But dere *iss no coffee*," Smith mimicked his bunky. "Way we been killin' an' eatin' our hosses, might try smokin' hoss-hair in our pipes."

"Me," Pulaski growled, "I like better to

smoke in de pipe hair of renegade vot will sell us outdt to de damned Sioux."

And though it was too dark for a man to see past his upheld fist, Joe knew that Pulaski had turned his hard black eyes upon him as he spoke. These troopers had fought their way north from the Big Horns and the Powder River, seen comrades die in the Big Bend of the Rosebud, heard grim tales from the Little Big Horn of the fate that had overtaken Custer's Seventh.

Eager for revenge on Crazy Horse and old Tonka-ta-Tonka—the Sitting Bull—they had discovered plans for war foiled on the head of Heart River. The Indian enemy had cunningly split into two outfits. One—led presumably by Sitting Bull—and headed north toward the safety of the Canadian wilds. The other was returning south toward the Black Hills and the winter comforts offered by the Indian agencies.

With no chance of overtaking Sitting Bull, but wishing to encounter the red enemy before winter closed in, General Crook had given orders for the march south. Which meant fighting and starving, living on horse meat for the gambler's chance of overtaking Crazy Horse and Gall and American Horse and all the other noted Sioux chieftains who hadn't fled north to Canada.

An easier way beckoned to Fort Lincoln, in Dakota Territory, where troopers could have found food and tobacco without risking their scalps. But not a trooper had murmured when the Gray Fox headed for Deadwood. And not a man had flinched when his trusty horse or mule had been butchered by the quartermaster and issued out as rations to the gaunt troop messes. There was *always* the chance that by starving they might come face to face with the red foes who had trapped the Seventh, and taken its men and colors and all other things that a regular regiment prizes above life itself.

So Privates Smith and Pulaski jested

about tobacco as they rode through the night guarding Joe Conway. But their laughter was acid-sharp and Joe knew that their fingers were heavy upon the triggers of the carbines laid across their saddle fronts.

They didn't call him a renegade but they'd take no chances. They had seen Joe reveal old Grampa and Anton Honda as common cheats in the fly loo game, but they *had also* seen the moccasin tracks of old John Bear Foot near the looted cache of ammunition.

The fly loo game, Joe thought, as his shaggy, starving pony skated and slid through the mud, was an absurd start for this feud which had finally put Bear Foot into the hands of savage red enemies and himself under the guns of the cavalry's provost guard. Men on campaign sought and invented many ways of amusement to break the dull monotony. It was old Grampa who had devised fly loo.

A half dozen troopers each put a dollar or two in the pot. Then each man placed a lump of sugar on a blanket. The money went to the man on whose lump of sugar a fly was last to alight. In a cavalry camp, where flies were frequent, such a game moved swiftly and pots, though small, came often. It was John Bear Foot who had noted, with his Indian keenness, that old Grampa won the majority of the pots. And spying on the buffalo hunter, he had caught him digging up the fat greasy roots of the wild carrot plant. Since Indians prized the root, with its bitter, nauseating taste, mainly as a rheumatism cure, and old Grampa never complained of pains in his aged but nimble joints, John had revealed his discovery to Joe.

They had rubbed oil from the wild carrot plant on sugar and discovered that its odor warded off flies. And Joe had jumped old Grampa at the end of the next fly loo game, and proved, by the taste of Grampa's lump of sugar, that he was cheating his army friends for small stakes. Grampa, declaring

that he was mild as milk and not a man to fight about a joke, had coughed up all his winnings.

But a month later John Bear Foot was dead and scalped, or a prisoner of the Sioux, and Joe Conway was under army guard.

Private Smith tried to draw Joe out to break the tedium of the chilly ride.

"Do you suppose Bear Foot figured he had a right to do what he wanted to with that ammunition? After all, it was his'n. Only reason we buried it was because his pack mule played out. We had to butcher the brute for rations. And though we didn't figger fifty-caliber shells would be much value to the Injuns, still we couldn't afford to take a chance. Some of the war whoops might be packin' old-style Sharps buffalo guns like your pardner. And a fifty-caliber slug makes a hole in a soldier big enough to throw a dog through."



THE majority of frontiersmen and troops used forty-five caliber ammunition. Since the hostiles had taken plenty of carbines of this caliber from the Seventh, Smith spoke the truth. Old John's prized fifty caliber Sharp shells would be too big for their weapons. Perhaps John, angered over the loss of three thousand rounds which would have put him through a winter's hunt, had returned to the cache to retrieve his ammunition and there been captured by the Sioux.

Joe said slowly, dark eyes peering ahead into the rainy night, ears alert for sounds to either flank of stealthy enemy scouts, "I don't know *what* happened to John. But I do know that he'd never sell out to the Sioux. He wasn't 'specially fond of white men. But he had been raised among the Shoshone people over on Wind River, and from the time he could climb up on a war pony, he had fought the Sioux.

"He told me that once they caught his

brother, who was huntin', on the head of Tongue River. They took this brother and cut him up and hung the quarters like sides of beef on a tree by a little crick. Afterwards that crick was called Hangin' Man. No! John might hate for the army to kill his mule and bury the spare ammunition he had saved so careful for a winter hunt, but he'd never sell that ammunition to the Sioux."

Pulaski asked in his slow, deep voice, "It vos strange that *you* like dis Injun so mooch? For you are white mans."

"No stranger than that you, a Pole, should enlist with the American army in a war when you couldn't speak a word of English."

"You speak wrong, Joe. I am run away from Poland because dere iss no chance for little man there. In America is dis chance for man if he has guts to fight for it. So I am glad to join with Americans who are my friends."

"I come west as a wet-nosed kid," Joe said bitterly. "From a big city where I thought I wouldn't have a chance to get somewheres. I was workin' on the Union Pacific extension down on Green River when I met up with old John. He was an Injun, but he took a fancy to me and showed me all the tricks he knew about huntin' an' trappin'."

"He made a man outa me after savin' my fool life a half dozen times from blizzards and scalpin' parties and grizzly b'ar and sich. I been ridin' with you boys all summer. I fought with you against old Crazy Hoss on the Rosebud. But I'm warnin' you *now*—that though I handed over my guns when Riley called for 'em—I wouldn't stop at killin' either of you with my bare hands if it meant the chance of savin' John Bear Foot."

A horseman came up from the darkness. And Conway cursed himself for his outburst as he heard old Grampa's slow laugh.

"So you'd fight the hull American army 'count of a damned Injun," Grampa

drawled. And he laughed. Then he added. "Oh—sugar!"

Joe lurched around in his high-backed Indian-style saddle. The gray light was increasing, as the rising sun fought with the rain and the fog. Dimly he saw the outline of Grampa's ribby pony, of the bearded buffalo hunter who taunted him, never letting him forget that it was because of the fly loo game that Joe had run into this tight.

As Joe struck out with clenched fist, his riding equipment rattled loudly. Old Grampa swung far back in his saddle to avoid the blow. Anton Honda came up suddenly on his horse, doubtless opening his buffalo hide coat to grab his shotgun. Privates Smith and Pulaski, whipping their mounts around, sought to close in on Joe.

But Sergeant Riley, spurring out of the gloom, cursed out his followers, keeping his voice low as he did so, because they had allowed the noise of the argument between Joe and Grampa to reveal the position of the command.

"I'll hogtie you," he said threateningly to Joe, "if you don't ride quiet. And you know what chance a hogtied man would have if the Sioux should jump us in this fog." He turned on Grampa and Honda. "You two!" he rasped. "What right you got pesticatorin' around a prisoner? Get the hell back with the pack trains where you belong."

Honda showed his sharp white teeth in a coyote grimace. But old Grampa said placatingly to the angry provost sergeant, "Us two sorta got muddled up in the fog. We come up alongside just as this Conway threatened to kill Smith and Pulaski. Ordinarily we're mild as milk—me an' Anton—but that was too much for us. Threatenin' to kill two good soldiers, all on account of a no-good Injun. . . ."

Riley swung on Smith and Pulaski. The light was strong enough now for men to see each other's faces. Ahead, tired troopers were dismounting in the cover of a high-

walled creek. The mule trains trudged past silently except for the creaking of rawhide packs.

"This Conway makin' enough war talk for me to put him in irons?" Riley asked sharply. "Remember, you two, we can't take any chances. If we bump into any Injuns, we got to spot 'em first to make a real fight. Otherwise, mebbe a lot of Crook's men will starve before they hit Deadwood."



PRIVATE SMITH wrinkled his long blue Yankee nose. Private Pulaski sat big and grimly silent in his McClellan saddle. Then the small New Englander, casting a wary side glance at hard-eyed Joe Conway, answered his sergeant.

"The boy," he explained, "was a little upset about his pardner. Mebbe he did say a thing or two that he didn't mean. But me and Private Pulaski understood him. There'd 'uv been no trouble if this old jackass and his buzzard-beaked friend hadn't come ridin' up. Tell them to stay away, Sergeant, and me and Pulaski will take good care of Conway."

That was the first friendly word Joe had heard since they'd put him under arrest. And it touched his heart. Smith and Pulaski, simple men and soldiers. Men whose ancient homes lay far apart in the old world. But men who had learned, through bitter privation and danger in the new west, the meaning of friendship, and that color and creed and blood could not change that meaning.

Riley blinked his hard gray eyes, then said gruffly, "Well, you two kape your weather eyes peeled. Both on this prisoner and for signs of the enemy. Grouard, the scout, thinks we're not far from that bunch headin' for the Black Hills. Probably American Horse's band. We'll halt for a while in the cover of this crick, which is

(Continued on page 136)

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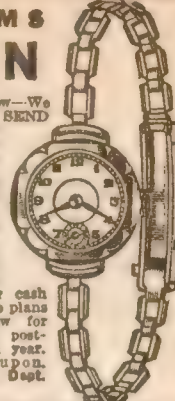


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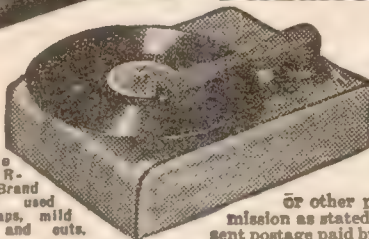
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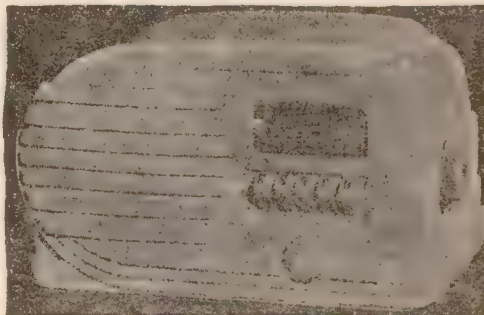
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(Continued from page 134)

called the Big Plum. And be after eatin' our breakfast while the poor bastes of hosses and mules rest, since there's not much for them to eat."

It was dark-faced Frank Grouard, Crook's chief of scouts, piloting this lonely column through the vast badland country, who showed Joe Conway the tracks of Indian horsemen in the muddy bed of the creek during the halt. Smith and Pulaski looked on silently, interested only in getting a living Sioux under the sights of their carbines.

"Not many riders," the laconic chief scout said. "Mebbe the bucks who robbed that cache and killed your partner."

Joe was quartering over the muddy ground like a bird dog. "If they'd killed Bear Foot," he said, "they wouldn't have taken time to hide his body. They'd have quartered him just like they did his brother. No, he's alive and a prisoner. And he'll try somehow to let me know."

Grouard grunted, peered through the wisps of fog that rose and fell over the butte-studded prairie. "Why would they bother to keep him alive?" he asked.

"They hate him. Like they do Washakie, chief of the Shoshones, with whom John rode as a young buck. Mebbe they aim to take him back to the Black Hills."

"Mebbe," Grouard agreed. Then he went on, "And there's a good chance of it happenin'. This fog makes trailin' hard. All signs show plenty of Sioux in front of us. Not far away. We're not far from Slim Buttes where I hear the pony feed is pretty good. American Hoss, or any chief, might stop there to rest, put out scouts, and hope we'd blunder into a trap in this storm."

Joe Conway, who had been squatting in the shade of a wild plum tree, arose and said calmly, "John Bear Foot was alive when the Sioux crossed this crick. They was treatin' him bad, makin' fun of him as though he were a squaw."

"How you know that?" Grouard asked.

"Under the plum tree. A footprint made by a man who was walkin' barefooted through this mud—this cold mud! They was makin' John travel that way so he'd freeze his feet. Or he took off a moccasin and made the track in the hopes that I'd find it."

Grouard and the troopers inspected the huge mark printed by the naked heel and toes of a man. Only Joe's careful search had discovered it hidden there under the low hanging branches of the plum tree.

"Might be old Bear Foot," Grouard agreed. "Damned few Sioux or Cheyennes, or even Araps, have such big feet. Shoshones, too—they're stocky-built. Strange your pard has such big feet."

"He was raised by the Shoshone," Joe said. "But John always figured he really come from Ute stock, far to the south. And the Utes are big men. About the biggest Injuns in the west. Mebbe he got his feet from Ute stock. I don't know. All I know is that John Bear Foot put a track here so I'd cut his trail and know he was still alive. And when we run into that village—whether it belongs to American Hoss or not—I'll find old John. . . ."



TROOPERS were mounting weary, big-eyed horses. Tom Moore and his packers were lining out the mules. The advance guard mustered, deployed, and rode out of the creek into the fog with Grouard as point.

Grampa Sikes ambled past on his buckskin horse with lean Anton Honda riding at his left stirrup. He laughed and pawed his wet beard and said to glowering Joe Conway.

"You will play hell gettin' Bear Foot away from the Sioux. You got no gun. Mebbe—" his laugh floated back—"mebbe you could trade for him with a little sugar!"

Joe stood glaring, fists knotted, mouth

SCALPS FOR THE GENERAL

hard-set in his lean brown face. "Damn him," he whispered huskily.

"Get aboard your hoss," Private Smith said. "Cussin' about life in general don't hurt no Sioux."

In mid-afternoon, the column halted a second time after a slow progress through the slippery mud. Soldiers growled that doubtless another plum patch had been found. But the word passed back from the front was that the advance guard had discovered a herd of grazing Indian ponies. Only the fog had saved the command from being discovered by the enemy. Nearby was a ravine, and into this the soldiers and the pack trains filed. As they rode, Joe Conway glimpsed, not far distant, the fog-shrouded outline of a high bit of ground.

"Slim Buttes," he told Privates Smith and Pulaski. "A place we're apt to always remember."

Half frozen in the fog and rain, men crouched in the ravine. There was no thought now of rations needed for both men and mounts. The enemy was in sight, the enemy they had trailed for hundreds of miles from the Big Horns to the Heart.

Night came on as they waited, and they knew that toward the rear Crook was toiling toward them through the mud with three regiments of starving men and horses. Troopers in this relief column had been drawn from the Second, Third and Fifth regiments. They had tasted the flesh of their own mounts and the taste was bitter in their mouths. A taste which could only be wiped away by the acrid flavor of burnt gunpowder.

Joe Conway lay in the freezing gumbo on the outskirts of the bivouac beside Private Smith. Sergeant Riley had ordered Pulaski away on other duty with the mule trains. Hearing the low-voiced talk among the troopers as word was passed of plans for a dawn attack, Joe mused on ways of escape, of getting a gun, of rescuing old John from the Sioux before he was killed,

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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

either by his captors or the bullets of cavalrymen.

Scouts believed the hostile village ahead consisted only of enough lodges to house two hundred Sioux. But not far away would be the main body of warriors, camped within easy reinforcing distance. The attack, to succeed, must surround and capture the village before fugitives could find and bring back reinforcements.

Toward dawn, Riley told Smith that the command had been split into several parties. Two, of fifty troopers each, would attack the village. Twenty mounted men under Lieutenant Schwatka would round up and drive off the Indian pony herd. The remainder of the column—including Joe and his guards—would bring on the horses and mules.

It was then that Joe Conway pleaded for his guns, for the chance to ride up ahead with the scouts where his frontier skill could be used. But Riley shook his head. Orders were orders.

"We can't forget that your pardner disappeared with three cases of ammunition," Riley said. "We aren't callin' you a renegade; official. But since we know plenty of white skunks are makin' big money sellin' supplies to the Injuns, we just ain't takin' no chances."

There came the bitter darkness of just before dawn. Scores of men moved around Joe in the blackness, obeying low orders as they grouped in the several attacking parties. The feel of danger gripped that camp like the claws of a wild animal. If the Indians heard but the faintest tinkle of a mule's bell, they'd send speedily for help. And what then could one hundred and fifty half-starved troopers do against the might of the Sioux Nation?

Fifty dismounted troopers under Lieutenant Crawford started down a long hill that led from the ravine toward the Indian camp on the cutbanked edge of a winding badland stream.

SCALPS FOR THE GENERAL

Joe whispered to Private Smith, "I got the value of a thousand buffalo robes banked down in Cheyenne. It's all you're in if you'll turn your head while I slide off this damned hoss."

Smith shook his head. "Not for a million buffalo robes. Orders is orders!"

"But old John! The minute the fight starts the Sioux'll sink a war axe in his head. Give me a chance to rescue him."

"What could you do?"

"They're all asleep. I might find him tied up like a wild dog, left out in the storm all night. A big chance." Joe's voice broke. "But he's my partner—my best friend—like Pulaski's you're in."

Dawn was near. Gray light tinged the darkness now. Suddenly toward the front arose the thunder of hoofs. Not coming toward the pack trains, but receding as horses raced toward the Indian village. A moment later came the sound of a gunshot.

Smith cursed. "There goes our chance for a surprise!"

All around, the packers and the hunters were dismounting, hobbling their mules, filling their pouches with extra ammunition. Riley came up, panting like a wind-broken horse. He said to Smith, "Some yellow dog got Pulaski."

"Got Pulaski?"

"He was guardin' some of the loose Injun ponies while the rest of the boys was round-in' 'em up quiet. They jumped him as he sat there on his hoss. Shot him outa the saddle and stampeded the ponies he was holdin'. The herd busted straight back through the Sioux village. And all hell's busted loose—"

Then Riley was gone. Far ahead the rattling roll of cavalry carbines echoed from the cliffs of the creek on which the Sioux village lodges were set.

It was dawn, and the surprise attack had been foiled by a stampede of ponies. And undoubtedly, swift Sioux warriors would be speeding to bring back reinforcements.



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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

But what of John Bear Foot? Was he alive down there in that valley where gunpowder smoke now mingled with the gray fog? Joe Conway turned in his saddle, hands coming up for a slash at the red turkey neck of Private Smith. And he looked straight into the New Englander's pale blue eyes and found something there that stopped him.

Smith whispered. "They got the Polack. The skunks—they got him—"

"He was your bunk!" Joe said.

"He was. He talked broken but he took me under his wing when I was a rookie and showed me the ropes."

"Like old John did for me."

A rough command rang out. "Every man down into the camp! Dig in! The Sioux have got across the crick! We gotta make a stand!"

Some men were mounted but most were afoot as packers and train guards started down the long hill toward the creek. Joe paced Private Smith. Greasy smoke rolled up where the advance of the attack had struck the camp and set fire to some of the Sioux lodges.

Then, from across the creek, whistling over the camp and straight into the crowd of men blundering down the hill, Indian bullets stormed. Private Smith reined down his horse. He leaned over his saddle a moment and his left hand crept under his blue blouse. Then he turned toward Joe. And although his voice sounded steady enough, there was a queer glaze creeping slowly over his Yankee blue eyes.

"They—they plugged me," he whispered. "Can't see to ride. Can't see. . . ." His voice faltered. He gripped his saddle with that left hand. And it was red from that which it had encountered beneath Smith's blouse.

"I—I'm turnin' my head," Smith faltered. "But—but not for—for your buffalo robes. My—my carbine—"

He slumped and would have rolled off his horse if Joe hadn't ridden in and thrown

SCALPS FOR THE GENERAL

out a supporting arm about his big black

"Go down," Private Smith whispered, "and—and get back somethin' from them for the Polack. And—old John Bearfoot. And—" Smith tried to laugh, but the laugh died huskily in his throat. "Don't—don't take sugar. . . ."

So Private Smith was laid out, by Joe Conway in the mud on the bullet-whipped face of the hill above the flaming Indian camp. And then Joe charged, with the drags of the train guard, down into the smoky hell of the Slim Buttes fight.

◇ ◇ ◇

H E HEARD the shouted order of Captain Mills for a retreat, and the reply of Crawford that retreat up the hill was now impossible. For the Sioux held strongly to positions across the creek and mud flew from the hill as they poured in a crossfire. On the south flank of the village, another small group of warriors had taken cover and their guns dropped several troopers as cavalymen stormed through the camp, discovering fat parfleche packs of dried meat, even precious tobacco.

All around Joe Conway swirled the blood and death of the close-range fight. But he moved like a man in a dream through the smoke, seeking trace of old Bear Foot. He paid not the smallest heed when a wild-eyed trooper burst from a teepee, waving a fat roll of currency. Not until he heard the sharp voice of Sergeant Riley.

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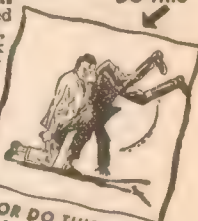
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BIG-BOOK WESTERN MAGAZINE

"Soldiers' pay," Riley said. "Thousands of dollars. Likely it come from the Seventh. Turn it in. There's families that'll be nadin' it." Then Riley went on. "And unless that volunteer reaches Crook, we're apt to lose what pay *we* got, right here at Slim Buttes."

Then Joe Conway awoke to the peril that faced this small command because a trooper had been murdered and the surprise attack foiled by a pony stampede. Out of the south was rolling the might of the Sioux Nation, eager to surround and wipe out this bold little band of troopers before Crook could come up. The same hand that had cut down Private Pulaski, might he riding after the volunteer courier seeking to prevent a call for help from reaching the general.

John Bear Foot might be alive or dead somewhere in this camp. But the lives of brave men depended now on word reaching Crook. Joe Conway whipped around his horse. Just as Sergeant Riley spotted him and shouted, "Disarm that man. He's a prisoner!"

Old Grampa Sikes cried shrilly, "Private Smith, who was guardin' him, is stretched out dead up on the hill. I seen him."

A half dozen guns spat whining lead as Joe beat his jaded pony down the hind leg with the stock of Smith's carbine. As he quartered up the slippery hill, with Indian slugs pacing his gallop, he was thinking that Anton Honda, old Grampa's shadow, for once hadn't been there to back up his partner with the deadly sawed-off shotgun.

Nor was Joe much amazed when, six miles down the trail, Honda rode out of a plum thicket and threw down with his shotgun. Joe's pony, run to a whisper, had just slumped over. Joe was standing over its quivering body. He whirled as he heard Honda's shout, tried to drop behind the body of the pony.

Low buckshot from Honda's double-barreled charge tore a jagged hole in Joe's left shoulder. But he braced himself against

SCALPS FOR THE GENERAL

the sharp agony that engulfed him, recalling how Private Smith had clung to a saddle, and forced up Smith's carbine and fired, Honda, over-eager since he believed his man was dying on his feet, galloped straight into a .45 slug.

Crook found Joe when he came over the rise with his men streaming after him, stretched out for miles toward the rear according to the speed of their horses. The Gray Fox only nodded when Joe spoke, stiff-lipped, declaring that he believed Honda was a renegade who had sold out to the Sioux in the hope of getting some of the money that had been taken from Custer's men.

"A packer reached me with word from Mills's command," Crook said. "He also said he was followed and fired on. Maybe by this dead man Honda. Or you. If you can travel, we'll look into this—after we whip the Sioux."

"I can travel," Joe whispered.

It was noon before Crook and his leading troopers reached the camp. But Joe was there, huddled over the neck of a mule, left arm strapped to his side but right hand still clutching Smith's carbine. In the shadow of Slim Buttes, the general laid out his line of battle.

When howling Sioux reinforcements charged across the creek, expecting to find only a small band of tired troopers and packers, they rode instead into the vengeful fire of Crook's main command. They scat-

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tered on their swift little ponies and stayed at long range while the Gray Fox again mustered his men.

"Resume the march to Deadwood," Crook ordered Captain Mills. "The command is forward. Bring back supplies according to the original plan. The Fifth Cavalry will serve as our rear guard."

Crook moved through the burning camp, where troopers were eating jerked beef and smoking Indian tobacco. Joe Conway trailed dully after him, all hope gone that he would find John Bear Foot. South of the camp, soldiers had found a cave dug in a bank where Indian warriors had sheltered themselves as they sniped at foemen. Here Charley White had just been killed and word ran that American Horse, himself, was in the cave. At Crook's command, an interpreter shouted to the Sioux chief that he'd not be killed if he surrendered. This was the promise of the Gray Fox.

In that intent little group, as American Horse came forth, followed by a few of his warriors, stood Sergeant Riley and old Grampa Sikes. American Horse had been shot through the middle. He walked out, straight as one of his own buffalo arrows, but he was dying as he walked. He ordered his men to throw down their guns. One refused. Another, wrapped in a blanket, carried no weapon. The armed Sioux whirled on old Grampa. He spat out a curse. He flung his gun straight toward Grampa. And then, following in, buried six inches of scalping knife in the buffalo killer's breast.

Riley and two other men downed the cursing Sioux. Old Grampa lay in the mud.

"Mild as milk," he murmured. Then his eyes rolled back.

◆ ◆ ◆

A TROOPER raised his pistol to drive a bullet through the head of the Sioux who had killed old Grampa. But Crook sharply ordered that fire be

SCALPS FOR THE GENERAL

held; he had given his word that American Horse and his men would not be killed if they surrendered.

It was then that Joe Conway leaped forward and dragged the blanket off the frame of the unarmed Indian who had followed American Horse out of the cave.

"Bear Foot!" he cried. Grief rang in his voice, for he believed, at that moment, that Bear Foot had turned renegade and gone over to the Sioux, all for some of the green paper with pictures on it.

Sergeant Riley lined a gun on Joe. "You're under arrest!" he barked. "You and your Injun pard!"

John Bear Foot spoke sadly. "Old man on ground. You too late for puttem *him* in guard house."

"Too late?"

"He send word to Sioux by Anton Honda 'bout shells in cache. They go ridum down. I trailum. Not know then they talk heap loud so I will do that. So Sioux grab me when they give old man and Honda heap big wad of green pitcher paper. They take me along, make me walk like old squaw. Laugh at me. But no seeum when I leave mark for partner. He follow. So he find me." John Bear Foot smiled and stretched out his hand to Joe. "I *know* you find me," he whispered.

"But why would Injuns old Grampa had done business with, *kill him?*" Sergeant Riley sputtered. "Hell, that story don't hang together!"

John Bear Foot shook his head. "They find out, when they get in cave that ammunition play out. They open box of shells Grampa sellum. Shells *too big* for their guns. Like game with sugar, Grampa he even cheat Injuns. You look top of his moccasins. Mebbe so find wad of pitcher paper they give him."

John Bear Foot shook his grizzled head again. "Injun," he said sagely, "he git heap mad. Just like white man when he git cheated."

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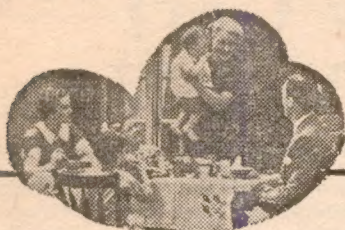
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